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"Millions of Luxurious Citizens": Consumption and Citizenship in the Urban Northeast, 1800-1865

Abstract

In the century following the American Revolution, culturally powerful middle-class citizens in the northeast slowly abandoned a vision of civic non-consumption that rested on the strength of imperial boycotts and instead converted their consumption of luxury goods and products into a civic act.

This dissertation reveals how these citizens challenged the limitations that a republican vision of political economy placed on consumers in the early republic. Through discussions over taxation, tariff and market regulation, middle-class men and women struggled to define their civic rights and obligations as consumers in a capitalist democracy. As they began to imagine their civic identity more in terms of their capacity as consumers rather than producers, well-off citizens created a new vision of economic citizenship that acknowledged the consumer as a rights-bearing individual.

By the end of the Civil War, middle-class Americans in the North had transformed the civic dimensions of consumption. By disconnecting consumption from a republican political economy, middle-class citizens made consumption part of a new politics of representation, freeing themselves from older civic restraints. In doing so, they laid the groundwork for the consumer culture that would escalate rapidly in the twentieth century. Using an analytical framework that combines cultural history with the study of political economy, *Millions of Luxurious Citizens* asks how it was that nineteenth century middle-class producers, retailers and consumers imagined the demands of the nation's economy and translated those ideas into a vision of citizenship that made shopping in America both a right and an obligation.

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**“MILLIONS OF LUXURIOUS CITIZENS”: CONSUMPTION AND CITIZENSHIP IN
THE URBAN NORTHEAST, 1800-1865**

Joanna Cohen

A DISSERTATION

in

History

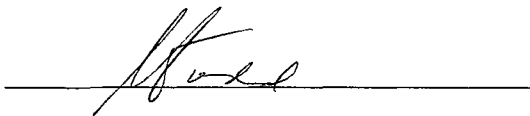
Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

**in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

2009



Dissertation Supervisor



Graduate Group Chairperson

**“Millions of Luxurious Citizens”: Consumption and Citizenship in the Urban Northeast,
1800-1865.**

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Joanna Cohen

To my parents.
Jonathan and Micky Cohen.

A dissertation is a strange thing. It has multiple ends. You hand it in, you defend it and you deposit it and it is still never quite complete. It is an open ended project, waiting for you to take it on to the next step of its existence. In the same way it has many beginnings. The moment you begin your research, the first day of a particular course that planted a seed on an idea or even your first day of graduate school. But in thinking about all the people who have helped me complete this task, I have realized that the beginning of this project extends much farther back than the start of my graduate school days, making the list of people to whom I owe my gratitude that much longer. As a British citizen I am trained to guard against sentiment. Nonetheless, it is wonderful to finally be able to thank all those people, who supported, encouraged and inspired me to both start and finish this project.

This project is dedicated to my parents, Jonathan and Micky Cohen. It is hard to adequately sum up all the wonderful things they have passed on to me, so I will mention only a few. Through the places they took me, the ideas they shared with me and the questions they asked me, they gave me a love of learning that will stay with me all my life. They gave me the confidence and courage to embark on hard projects and perhaps most valuable of all in a project like this, they taught me how to stay the course. It is fair to say that this would not have been completed without their help.

Richard, my brother, has played his own special role in helping me to complete this project. His early offer of providing readers for the dissertation has not been forgotten and although it is somewhat unconventional, I may still hold him to it. Not only did it make me laugh but it also let me know that he was proud of me, two things that have sustained me, perhaps more than he knows. The other family member who has

sustained me is Diane Storck. My American cousin, she gave me a home away from home from the moment I arrived in the U.S. Everything from food and furniture to a Thanksgiving holiday (even when I was no longer in Chicago) was provided without hesitation, making me feel that even though I had crossed an ocean, I still had someone who would look out for me who was close by.

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ABSTRACT

“MILLIONS OF LUXURIOUS CITIZENS”: CONSUMPTION AND CITIZENSHIP IN THE URBAN NORTHEAST, 1800-1865.

JOANNA COHEN

STEPHANIE MCCURRY

In the century following the American Revolution, culturally powerful middle-class citizens in the northeast slowly abandoned a vision of civic non-consumption that rested on the strength of imperial boycotts and instead converted their consumption of luxury goods and products into a civic act.

This dissertation reveals how these citizens challenged the limitations that a republican vision of political economy placed on consumers in the early republic. Through discussions over taxation, tariff and market regulation, middle-class men and women struggled to define their civic rights and obligations as consumers in a capitalist democracy. As they began to imagine their civic identity more in terms of their capacity as consumers rather than producers, well-off citizens created a new vision of economic citizenship that acknowledged the consumer as a rights-bearing individual.

By the end of the Civil War, middle-class Americans in the North had transformed the civic dimensions of consumption. By disconnecting consumption from a republican political economy, middle-class citizens made consumption part of a new politics of representation, freeing themselves from older civic restraints. In doing so, they

laid the groundwork for the consumer culture that would escalate rapidly in the twentieth century. Using an analytical framework that combines cultural history with the study of political economy, *Millions of Luxurious Citizens* asks how it was that nineteenth century middle-class producers, retailers and consumers imagined the demands of the nation's economy and translated those ideas into a vision of citizenship that made shopping in America both a right and an obligation.

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Introduction

The Conundrum of Civic Consumption in America.

On September 11th 2008, Senator Barack Obama and Senator John McCain made an appearance at a nationally televised discussion at Columbia University in New York, a forum convened to discuss National Service. Seated in front of a live audience, both presidential candidates were given an opportunity, on a day of “national mourning and memory,” to move “beyond party and partisanship” and articulate their vision of good citizenship in the twenty-first century. The first to be interviewed was John McCain.

Almost immediately the moderator asked:

Senator, as recently as this past Sunday, you talked very openly about the fact that Americans should have been asked to do more than go shopping or travelling. What would you have done as president in those circumstances, to make people aware of what they should do as Americans, after 9/11?¹

¹ Richard Stengel, Judy Woodruff, John McCain and Barack Obama, “Transcript: ServiceNation Presidential Forum at Columbia University,” <http://www.clipsandcomment.com/2008/09/11> [accessed October 13, 2008].

McCain did not hesitate. “I would have called them to serve,” he answered and went on to enumerate all the ways in which citizens could have acted in the wake of the disaster. His deliberate rejection of George W. Bush’s call for citizens to go shopping post 9/11 or indeed any engagement with consumption, from this list of civic acts was noticeable. In fact, the Senator appeared to go out of his way to separate the idea of “going shopping” from civic duty and patriotic responsibility. Less than an hour later, Senator Obama appeared on stage and echoed McCain’s distaste for the idea that Americans might serve their nation by going to the mall.² Their shared dismissal went by without comment from the moderators or response from the audience. No one found the rejection of consumption as a civic act particularly surprising. Perhaps the audience recognized the rejection as an attempt by both candidates to put political distance between themselves and Bush. But in fact, by dividing shopping from the work of national service, the two senators, the moderators and the audience all seemed to tacitly agree that consumption was more an act of personal indulgence than a performance of civic service.

Yet in spite of the candidates’ instinctive denial, only two years earlier, CNN credited American willingness to shop in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 with “bringing an economy shattered by the attacks back to full speed within a few years.”³ True or not, the CNN report heralded consumption as a serious force in America’s arsenal of economic weapons, one that could re-invigorate a vulnerable nation. The unspoken story of this report was clear, even if unacknowledged. Rather than an act of personal indulgence, shopping was a demonstration of national economic resilience and, to many, a performance of national bravura. This vision was one that was deliberately

² Ibid.

³ Manav Tanneeru, “9/11 trauma persists five years later” <http://cnn.usnews.com> [accessed October 13, 2008].

ignored by the Senators in the national service debate. Their short dismissal overlooked the idea that for some citizens, to return to the shops in the face of disaster was to prove that Americans would and could simply continue to be Americans.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 were not the only recent event to elicit this kind of confusion and ambivalence over the place of consumption in civic life. In 2006, a Christmas editorial in *USA Today* noted: “In Iraq, the troops are surrounded by hardship and a frenzy of violence. Back home, the frenzy is one of excess: shoppers battling for parking spaces in malls, snapping up everything from flat-panel TVs to the latest video games.”⁴ The stark juxtaposition of the life of the citizen-soldier and the life of the citizen consumer was no coincidence. Like Senator McCain, who also promoted military service as the ultimate expression of civic duty, this article condemned consumption and dismissed it as an act of patriotism. Implied by the contrast between the soldiers’ adversity and the consumers’ self-indulgence was a clear message: to shop was not a substitute for true service to the nation. Yet these same shoppers could have turned the page of their newspaper to find one of the thousands of advertisements that frame American consumption as part of the fabric of civic life. In the present moment, Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, President’s Day and even Veteran’s Day all come with sales drives and department store offerings that urge consumers to buy.

On the most basic symbolic level, these holidays which commemorate civic sacrifice and national service, are all configured as opportunities to consume. In fact, these connections seem to be relentless. They go beyond the confines of the stores and spread out into the public spaces of national life. The annual display of fireworks in New York on the Fourth of July is one such example. This celebration of American

⁴ *USA Today*, Dec., 22, 2006. I wish to thank Florian Olsen for bringing this quote to my attention.

independence is sponsored by Macy's department store. Even the debate on national service that the Senators took part in on 9/11 had its connections to consumption. The discussion was sponsored by the superstore Target. Thus, occasions that were once marked by the parades of urban craftsmen or the boisterous debates of partisan politics are now organized around stores, sales and brands.⁵ In short, despite all the efforts to claim that shopping is separate from the fabric of civic life in America, consumption and consuming are truly part and parcel of the practice and understandings of American civic belonging.

This troubled connection between American consumption and American citizenship was, of course, not born out of the disaster of 9/11, nor the War in Iraq. It has a much more deeply rooted history. While the current debates are distinctive responses to the political and economic conditions of the twenty-first century, they are nonetheless anchored in a relationship between consumption and citizenship that reaches back to before the nation's Declaration of Independence.⁶ Surprisingly, while the stories of the boycotts and the non-importation movements, the dumping of tea into the harbor at Boston and the patriotic ladies weaving of homespun are the bread and butter of the American narrative, the story of what happened after these events has yet to be fully told.

⁵ For discussions on the historical celebrations of the Fourth of July see David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); Simon P. Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 83-119. On the commercialization of holidays there is in fact little on the "civic" holidays and more on religious celebrations such as Christmas and Easter. For the best account of this trend see Eric Leigh Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

⁶ Current anxiety about the place of consumption in national life is magnified by the fact that at the end of the first quarter of 2009 Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE) accounted for 71% of the Gross Domestic Product. See Table 1.1.5 "Gross Domestic Product," www.bea.gov/national/nipaweb [accessed May 1, 2009].

Between the refusal to consume in the eighteenth century, and the rush to consume in the late nineteenth century there is a strange silence.⁷

This project explores the relationship between citizen and consumer as it evolved over the course of American history between the Revolution and the Civil War. It argues that to really understand this relationship, we must look beyond the formal political language that defines a citizen's relationship to their government, and examine instead the cultural assumptions and expectations that connect an individual to the nation-state, a relationship best described as civic belonging. Taking the ways in which men and women imagined the demands of a nation's economy seriously, this project argues that these expectations can reconfigure a citizen's understanding of their relationship to the nation-state and command a complex set of beliefs, agendas and practices, all without reference to a constitution. While never formalized into a set of legal rights or obligations, the notion of civic belonging goes beyond simply nationalist sentiment, a patriotism displayed on occasion. Rather it encompasses a powerful underlying logic that is shaped by a nation's political economy, its commercial life and its cultural practices.⁸ Civic belonging defines what an individual might expect to gain from his or her citizenship and in return can alter what an individual believes their country can ask them to do in the service of their nation.

⁷ In 2006 the *Journal of American History* published a review of literature on politics and consumption that jumped from the Revolutionary era to the early twentieth century, reflecting the gap in the literature. See David Steigerwald, T. H. Breen, and Elizabeth Cohen, "Exchange: American Consumerism," *Journal of American History* 93 (September 2006): 385–413.

⁸ I use Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick's definition of political economy. "The management of a state's economic affairs but embracing as well the entire range of relations between government and the social and economic order, having a clear moral component." I would add that it embraces the relationship between the state and the nation's cultural values as well. See Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 19.

This work reveals how consumption changed American understandings of civic belonging in the first half of the nineteenth century, making equal access to new goods the material expression of what it meant to live in a capitalist democracy. This project shows how it came to be that a country which had forged its national identity by asking the subjects of an empire to restrain themselves in the marketplace became a nation where citizens saw shopping for goods as an entitlement of citizenship and even re-imagined their consumption as a performance of civic strength. It is a re-counting of the ways in which consumption became a means of forging civic bonds, as well as a method of excluding individuals from the civic community. The ascendancy of the consumer in America today is so well established that this trajectory seems almost predestined. But the road from consumer restraint in the name of colonial insurrection to consumer freedom as the expression of nation was not inevitable. Consumers were not destined to become the liberal subjects who claimed as their right an access to material prosperity in the name of American democracy. But the ways in which politicians, merchants, manufacturers, retailers, advertisers, intellectuals and finally the consumers themselves created and embraced this identity is the story of how America became a nation of luxurious citizens.

Despite the scholarly attention America's "world of goods" has received in the last twenty years, the part everyday consumption of goods has played in reconfiguring American understandings of civic belonging in the nineteenth century has been largely overlooked. In part, this is because historians who explore the civic valences of consumption in the eighteenth and nineteenth century have tended to focus on the more

dramatic moments of non-consumption in American history. As a result we know more about the exceptional – the Revolutionary boycotts and the homespun movement – than we do about how daily practices and understandings of consumption altered Americans' own conception of their civic rights, obligations, virtues and duties.⁹ Instead, histories of consumption for the nineteenth century have focused on the important ways in which consumption constructed class categories and gender identities, providing an explanation of how it transfigured social categories, but not civic ones.

⁹ The phrase 'world of goods' is taken from the title of John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (New York: Routledge, 2003). The literature on consumption in American history has expanded exponentially in the last three decades. For some of the best examples see Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *Imagining Consumers: Design and Innovation from Wedgwood to Corning* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Knopf, 1992); Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds., *Of Consuming Interests. The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994); Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears, eds., *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983); Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes Towards the Consumer Society in America, 1875-1940* (Chicago: I.R. Dee, 1992); Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); William R. Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power and the Rise of a New American Culture*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1994); T.J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994); Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Ted Ownby, *American Dreams in Mississippi: Consumers, Poverty and Culture, 1830-1998* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Kathy Lee Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998); John Styles and Amanda Vickery, eds., *Gender, Taste and Material Culture in Britain and North America, 1700-1830* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006). There have been a few studies that explore the political meanings of consumption in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. See T.H Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), Linzy A. Brekke, "The 'Scourge of Fashion': Political Economy and the Politics of Consumption in the Early Republic," *Early American Studies* (Spring 2005): 106-39; Dana Frank, *Buy American: The Untold Story of Economic Nationalism* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1999); Laurence B. Glickman, "'Buy for the Sake of the Slave': Abolitionism and the Origins of American Consumer Activism," *American Quarterly* 56 (Dec. 2004): 889-912. All of these works look at moments of non-consumption in one form or another. For two important exceptions to this observation see Michael Zakim, *Ready Made Democracy: A History of Men's Dress in the American Republic, 1760-1860* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003) and Lori Merish, *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000). It is also worth noting that this oversight exists less noticeably for twentieth century history in part because of Lizabeth Cohen's work *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003) and Charles McGivern, *Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship, 1890-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

This oversight is all the more surprising given the rich literature on the role of capitalism in shaping the contours of American democracy. Indeed, historians have investigated at great length the ways in which the market economy influenced people's understanding of political life and altered the power structures of American society. In fact, the question of precisely *how* capitalism altered American political society has generated one of the field's longest running debates. Yet the very terms of this debate have caused consumption and its relation to political identity to be under-developed. Arguments over the nature of political life in a capitalist economy have centered on two things: first whether a free market does in fact create a democratic society, and second whether it is possible to identify a pre-capitalist political society as one in which a stronger democratic tradition flourished. These preoccupations have led scholars to ally themselves with one of two schools of thought. The "consensus" school focused on the ways in which commerce was underwritten by Lockean theories of liberty, emphasizing that private property and commercial self-interest promoted an egalitarian society. The "labor history" school chose instead to explore the ways in which capitalist modes of production and the infiltration of the market into everyday life helped destroy republican independence, resulting in a "market revolution" in antebellum America that undermined an earlier, more egalitarian society. While both provide rich analyses of the connections between American political and economic life, the focus on property and production has meant that neither place consumption in the antebellum period front and center.¹⁰

¹⁰ The consensus school is best represented by Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955) and Richard Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1948). More recent work includes Joyce Appleby, *Capitalism and the New Social Order. The Republican Vision of the 1790s* (New York: New York University Press, 1984). The labor school is best represented by Charles Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, (New York: Macmillan, 1956); Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American*

More recent scholarship on the cultural history of capitalism in the nineteenth century has begun to move beyond these old dichotomies. Taking as its starting point that capitalism had a logic that was neither fixed nor transcendent, this work explores the ways in which antebellum capitalism created new cultural, social and even political rationales in American society. In exploring the ways in which people understood accounting, currency, debt and success, this work has opened the history of capitalism and American political life to new interpretations. In this context the “market revolution” becomes more of a fitful evolution. While broad understandings of the marketplace combined with larger structural shifts in the nation’s economic development, to create erratic but significant changes in the lives of American citizens, these changes were shaped by older trains of thought and local practice. While this new scholarship provides fresh room for analyzing the development of capitalism in nineteenth century America, this body of work has yet to really grapple with the topic of consumption and more importantly the figure of the consumer as it evolved between the Revolution and the Civil War. However, these works do suggest a new approach, one where consumption is not viewed as part of an inevitable equation of “supply and demand” nor as a sign of unstoppable market dominance. Rather, through this new lens consumption in the antebellum North can be viewed as part of a created cultural logic, one that informed both

Working Class, 1788-1850 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); James Henretta, “Families and Farms: Mentalité in Pre-Industrial America,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 35 (Jan. 1978): 3-32; Michael Merrill, “Cash Is Good to Eat: Self-Sufficiency and Exchange in the Rural Economy of the United States,” *The Radical History Review* 4 (Winter 1977): 42-71; Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). The debate continues to be waged, particularly in larger synthetic works of the time period. Most recently Daniel Walker Howe’s monograph argues that the spread of market practices across America was hardly revolutionary to the farmers who had long been a part of the market economy. See Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). For an excellent overview of the debate see Paul A. Gilje, “The Rise of Capitalism in the Early Republic” in *The Wages of Independence: Capitalism in the Early American Republic*, ed. Paul A. Gilje (Madison, Wis.: Madison House, 1997) 1-23. For a succinct summary of the ways in which consumption has been overlooked see Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 2.

the expectations and identities of consumers, the practices of shopping itself and the creation of the consumer as a powerful figure in American life.¹¹

The word “consumer” was not a vernacular expression in the early republic. Used mostly by political economists and politicians, the term was common in intellectual and political discourse but was rarely used by retailers, manufacturers or advertisers and hardly ever by shoppers themselves. Instead, these latter groups employed words such as customer or purchaser, or more often referred to themselves as producers who bought things.¹² The “thrifty farmer” was more likely to appear as a description of a shopper, than the word “consumer” in the first half of the nineteenth century. The elusive nature of the consumer went beyond terminology. In the wake of the Revolution, Americans might have used goods to signal status or define virtue but just as often they imagined their identity through the lens of labor or region. Those who sought to classify individuals in terms of economic categories privileged production. While political economists and politicians from the mid-eighteenth century onwards recognized consumption as a crucial facet of the nation’s economy, the “consumer” in the early republic was not a clearly defined identity or category. Yet this obscurity did not persist. By the end of the Civil War, the figure of the consumer, though highly contested, was no longer overlooked by politicians. Merchants and retailers actively courted the consumer’s attention and political economists gained a new found respect for consumers’ tastes and desires. By the

¹¹ This literature is best represented by Edward J. Balleisen, *Navigating Failure: Bankruptcy and Commercial Society in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Naomi Lamoreaux, “Rethinking the Transition to Capitalism in the Early American Northeast,” *Journal of American History* 90 (Sep. 2003): 437-461; Stephen Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men and the Making of the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007); Scott Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005); Zakim, *Ready Made Democracy*.

¹² Cathy Matson and Peter Onuf, “Toward a Republican Empire: Interest and Ideology in Revolutionary America,” *American Quarterly*, 37 (Autumn 1985): 496-531.

1860s, these new more well-defined understandings of the consumer had altered how citizens defined both their economic interests and their political entitlements and obligations in the United States.

Approaching the figure of the consumer as a protean concept thus reflects the fact that the term was not self-evident to early Americans. However, this approach also requires some clarification about the ways in which the term “consumer” is employed in this study. The term refers primarily to the individuals who engaged with the marketplace as purchasers of durable and semi-durable retailed goods. However, it is also a word that is deliberately intended to echo the *philosophes* and politicians of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, who used the term “consumer” to connect the consuming individual to a national system of political economy thus giving it both a markedly political and moral valence. Indeed, the term “consumer,” with its material, commercial and political implications, is one that is ideally suited to a study that explores the evolving connections between consumption and civic belonging over the course of the nineteenth century.

If the figure of the consumer was a contingent creation in the early republic, so too was the concept of the citizen. In 1800, Jeffersonian legislators faced a number of difficult issues when it came to delineating who could claim to be a member of the United States of America. Rapid territorial expansion in the South and the West raised questions about which inhabitants in the vast and as yet politically unorganized “Empire of Liberty” would be able to claim citizenship.¹³ Moreover, the Constitution remained fundamentally ambiguous as to the locus of citizenship in the United States and the

¹³ John M. Murrin, “The Jeffersonian Triumph and American Exceptionalism,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 20 (Spring 2000): 2-4.

question of whether individual rights and protections stemmed from the several states or the federal state continued to cause contention up until the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment. As a result, each state in the Union could and did demand different requirements be satisfied when it came to the franchise. Finally, even as the Democratic-Republicans passed legislation that would make it easier for white male immigrants to claim US citizenship, judicial decisions and a plethora of legislation limited the rights and protections that blacks could claim as citizens and relegated most Native Americans to the demeaning category of “subjects.” Women’s claims to citizenship were even more ambiguous. Legally defined as *femme covert*, the federal courts treated women as subjects rather than citizens. But socially and culturally white women were expected to live up to certain civic obligations, in particular the task of teaching the habits of republican virtue to the future citizens of the nation. In short, the category of “American citizen” as a legal term was neither uniform nor stable.¹⁴

But citizenship, as Judith Shklar has reminded us, is something more than a legal construct: it is also an understanding about how to behave and what to expect when you belong, or wish to belong, to a nation-state. This vision of citizenship encompasses those who are not defined by the constitution as citizens, but who imagine themselves to be Americans, even as their government denies them the full privileges and protections of citizenship. This dimension of citizenship – best described as civic belonging – was also

¹⁴ Rogers Smith, *Civic Ideals. Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 165-196; Michael J. Lacey and Knud Haakonssen, eds., *A Culture of Rights: The Bill of Rights in Philosophy, Politics and Law – 1791-1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 1-18; Linda Kerber, *No Constitutional Right To Be Ladies. Women and the Obligations of Citizenship* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998).

highly contentious in the wake of the Constitutional convention.¹⁵ Having fused both liberal and republican visions of the nation to create the body politic in the 1780s, Americans were left with competing and conflicting understandings of civic belonging with which to contend in the early republic. In particular, elite politicians struggled to clarify what American citizens could hope to expect in the way of freedoms and what obligations those same citizens must be prepared to undertake as members of the newly forged United States.¹⁶

Political struggles over civic belonging were particularly acute when it came to questions of the country's economy. Confronted for the first time with the imperatives of a national economy, American men and women wondered how it was that they could serve their own interests while also protecting and sustaining the economic independence of their vulnerable new nation. Nor was this an abstract question. In 1782, suddenly bereft of the economic protections that the British empire had provided, although not entirely free of its restrictions either, Americans were forced to consider their individual economic decisions as part of a discussion about national strength. Moreover, the political rhetoric of the Revolution had emphasized the ways in which the British economic system had contributed to the corruption of the British body politic. This meant that Americans would also have to weigh their economic behavior on a national scale of

¹⁵ Judith N. Shklar, *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991). See also Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 1983 (London: Verso, 1991).

¹⁶ Smith, *Civic Ideals*, 37. See also Rosemarie Zagari, "The Rights of Man and Woman in Post-Revolutionary America," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 55 (Apr. 1998): 203-230 and Hendrik Hartog, "The Constitution of Aspiration and 'The Rights That Belong to Us All,'" *The Journal of American History*, 74 (Dec. 1987): 1013-1034.

moral virtue. For the men and women who were working to understand the nature of their civic belonging, the demands of the economy were paramount.¹⁷

Yet this urgency was not answered with clarity. Confusion reigned when Americans discussed what it meant to be a good economic citizen. This confusion was hardly surprising. Liberalism and republicanism are both highly demanding ideologies which, as scholar Rogers Smith notes, place great strains on their citizens. While liberalism demands that citizens labor hard to be industrious, rational and ultimately self-reliant, democratic republicanism asks that citizens commit to extensive political participation, sacrificing for the public good despite the pressures of a competitive marketplace. Drawing on these competing ideologies for legitimacy and guidance, Americans squabbled over the extent to which personal rights and freedoms were guaranteed in the marketplace and argued more still over what sacrifices a good citizen should be asked to make in the commercial sphere.¹⁸

By the late 1780s, some of these rights and obligations were becoming clear. The post-Revolutionary generation took up the thinking of John Locke and Adam Smith with alacrity and by fusing them together they created a strong belief that individuals had the right to the ownership of their own labor. Of course this right did not extend to women or slaves, but for white men, John Locke's assertion that "every man has a *property* in his own *person*" provided the foundation of the idea that every man had the right to both own

¹⁷ John E. Crowley, *The Privileges of Independence: Neomercantilism and the American Revolution, Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Cathy D. Matson and Peter S. Onuf, *A Union of Interests. Political and Economic Thought in Revolutionary America* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1990) and Cathy D. Matson "Capitalizing Hope: Economic Thought and the Early National Economy," *Journal of the Early Republic* 16 (Summer 1996): 273-91; Ann Fairfax Withington, *Toward a More Perfect Union: Virtue and the Formation of the American Republics* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 10-16; Jack N. Rakove, "Parchment Barriers and the Politics of Rights," in *A Culture of Rights* ed. Lacey and Haakonssen, 98-143.

¹⁸ Smith, *Civic Ideals*, 37.

and claim the fruits of their own labor. The importance of labor was supplemented by the centrality of property in the structure of the early republic's political economy. Drawing on the English Whig tradition of Harrington and Locke, Americans came to believe that property provided the basis of every man's claim to autonomy and thus freedom and independence. It became one of the guiding principles of American political life that a man's earnings and his property would be inherently protected by law from the depredations of both society and government. However, the power of these liberal theories were held in balance by a strong belief in regulating society for the benefit of the community or the public good. Within the marketplace in particular, local and state regulations controlled a number of different occupations through licensing laws and other restrictions. Both legally and through a larger conception of a moral economy, the private rights of citizens to pursue their own interest in the marketplace were held in check by communal obligations and restrictions. As Chief Justice Roger Taney argued in 1827 over the question of interstate commerce, there was no such thing in American jurisprudence as "the right to sell." In the interest of public welfare the community could always regulate business. Taney's pronouncement acts as a salutary reminder that neither selling nor buying was an inalienable right in the early republic. While property and labor were virtually sacrosanct, rights and obligations within the marketplace more broadly, remained open to question and interpretation.¹⁹

¹⁹ John Locke quote is in Jeffrey P. Sklansky, *The Soul's Economy: Market Society and Selfhood in American Thought, 1820-1920* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 19. Taney's quote taken from the case of *Brown v. Maryland*, 25 U.S. 12 Wheat. 419 (1827) and is in William Novak, *The People's Welfare. Law and Regulation in Nineteenth Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 112. On the question of rights to labor and property see Sklansky, *The Soul's Economy*, 3-7, 18-31; Drew R. McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 51-75. On the question of market regulation see Novak, *The People's Welfare*. Novak's position is that the early American economy was highly regulated and that in fact most Americans whole-heartedly endorsed those regulations. As such he

In the changing economic and political world of the early republic, the need to clarify the role of the consumer as a citizen intensified as Americans became more aware of the ubiquity of consumer goods in their lives. Of course, in many ways the presence of consumer goods – the textiles, ceramics, glassware, silverware, clothing accessories and other household items – in Americans’ lives and homes was not a new phenomenon. Beginning in the 1750s, colonial Americans had access to a transformed world of material goods as a result of a new commercialization of first English and then American society, that introduced an unprecedented range of cloths, crockery and metal goods into their shops and stores. New availability combined with more liberal credit and colonists increasingly took advantage of the growing variety of imported goods that could be found in the packs of peddlers and on the shelves of local dry goods stores. The disruption in consumption caused by the Revolution created much consternation but did not essentially destroy this growing taste for new goods.²⁰ As one historian has noted, by 1815 “fully half the number of families in the country, 400,000, owned luxury goods worth two hundred to six hundred dollars.” As this figure suggests, a large swath of American society owned a significant number of consumer goods by the early decades of the nineteenth century, ranging from everyday crockery to the lavish sideboard or piano

provides a useful and powerful corrective to the arguments of historians such as Joyce Appleby and T.H. Breen, who have over-emphasized Americans’ willingness to forgo a republican version of moral economy and embrace instead the liberal social contract. Nonetheless, I believe that that question of market regulation was in fact far more contentious than Novak would suggest, although not quite the stark confrontation between the vanguard of capital and the rural populace that historians such as Christopher Clark and Charles Sellers have presented us with. See Joyce Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order*; Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution*, especially 23-25; Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780-1860* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) and Sellers, *The Market Revolution*.

²⁰ The seminal work on England’s consumer revolution of the eighteenth century is Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J.H. Plumb, eds., *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth Century England* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1982). This revolution was what made the concomitant development of commercial culture and spread of consumer goods in America possible. See Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution*, 33-192.

forte. Despite the fact that some Americans still maintained that they were self-sufficient and could happily exist without foreign imported goods, it seems clear that in the early 1800s consumer goods, both foreign and domestic, were widely available and clearly enjoyed by over 50 percent of the families in the country.²¹

The growing number of families who enjoyed consumer goods was accompanied by a growing commercial culture that fostered new practices of consumption, although in the early 1800s this culture was limited in size and scope. Retail areas and the practice of “going shopping” were still innovations in American society for all except the very wealthy. While retailers did use trade cards and broadsides to advertise their name and new products, the art of advertising, that would cultivate a widely circulating vision of a middle-class consumer, was still some twenty years away.²² However, these new possibilities and practices, did make the question of how and what to consume more culturally pressing.

²¹ This statistic is taken from Cary Carson, “The Consumer Revolution in Colonial America: Why Demand?” in Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert eds., *Of Consuming Interests*, 692. It does not include the 40 percent of the south’s population who were slaves. For more on the spread of consumer goods in this period see also Bushman, *The Refinement of America*. For discussions on the topic of self-sufficiency as they took shape in the politics of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries see McCoy, *The Elusive Republic*, 14-15, 63-66, 107-113, 237-238. In terms of historiography, the debate over how self-sufficient Americans were is wide ranging. In general, it is clear that the relative importance of home production varied from region to region, but that very few Americans were entirely self-sufficient by 1815. See T.H Breen, “An Empire of Goods: The Anglicization of Colonial America, 1690-1776,” *Journal of British Studies*, 25 (Oct. 1986): 479-485; Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism*, 23-38, 64-93 and Carole Shammas, “How Sufficient was Early America?” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 13 (Autumn 1982): 247-272.

²² On the ways in which shopping in particular were changing see Ellen Hartigan-O’Connor “Collaborative Consumption and Politics of Choice in Early American Port Cities,” in *Gender, Taste and Material Culture*, ed., Vickery and Styles, 125-149; Ann Smart Martin, “Ribbons of Desire: Gendered Stories in the World of Goods,” in *Gender, Taste and Material Culture*, ed., Vickery and Styles, 179-200 and Thomas David Beal “Selling Gotham: The Retail Trade in New York City From the Public Market to Alexander T. Stewart’s Marble Palace, 1625-1860.” (Ph.D diss., State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1998). For the ways in which the American economy was changing more generally see Robert E. Gallman and John Joseph Wallis ed., *American Economic Growth and Standards of Living before the Civil War* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 1-19; Diane Lindstrom, *Economic Development in the Philadelphia Region, 1810-1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978); William Pencak and Conrad Edick Wright ed., *New York and the Rise of American Capitalism: Economic Development and the Social and Political History of an American State, 1780-1870*, (New York, NY: New-York Historical Society, 1989), xii-xv; Sellers, *The Market Revolution*.

During the Revolution, a nascent national population had defined their relationship to consumption through the act of the boycott. Staking their national identity on restraint and abstinence, the colonists had made it clear that their independence would be based on more than political declarations. They hoped to free themselves from their reliance on British manufactured goods, thus severing economic ties that kept them in a position of dependence. By 1782 the war with England had ended, but the hoped for freedom from British commercial restrictions did not materialize. By the start of the nineteenth century, Americans found themselves more dependent than ever on British goods and still entangled in a web of tariffs and taxations not of their own making. Jeffersonian Republicans in particular bridled against these checks on their independence and blamed the purchase of British manufactured goods for this humiliating relationship. Yet the flow of British goods into the United States did not abate.²³ Politicians thus turned to the mechanism of regulating the market via legislation – most notably the tariff – to address this problem. But having just staged a revolt to overthrow a mercantile regime this legislation was highly contentious. Small wonder then that few could decide on the consumer's role in shaping the new national economy. The confusion that Americans in New York and Philadelphia experienced in the post-Revolutionary political economy is thus the starting place for this work.

²³ On ideological and political confusion over the place of British manufactured goods see Frank, *Buy American*, 4-30; Burton Spivak, *Jefferson's English Crisis. Commerce, Embargo and the Republican Revolution* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1979) 1-24; McCoy, *The Elusive Republic*. On the balance of trade see Robert E. Lipsey, "U.S. Trade and the Balance of Payments, 1800-1913," in *The Cambridge Economic History of the United States*, eds., Stanley Engerman and Robert E. Gallman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 2:685-733.

The goods at the heart of these quarrels and confusions seem innocuous today.²⁴ Indeed, a shopping list of these contentious items reveals that they were by and large fabrics and household furnishings. Cottons, woolens and silks were the most problematic textiles; and ceramics, silverware, Britannia-ware, glassware, mirrors and carpets the most contentious household items. Other miscellaneous items that caused problems were ribbons, buckles, buttons and lace trimmings. These goods, which attracted consumers both rich and poor, might appear to have little in common with one another, but in the early 1800s they were united by two crucial facts. First, all of these goods were manufactured in and imported from Europe, in particular from England. Second, none of these items made further labor possible. Unlike agricultural implements, manufacturing chemicals or metal building supplies such as nails, these goods were deemed unproductive. It was because of their provenance and their nature that these wares became so troublesome to Americans in the early republic.

In economic terms, the fact that the United States depended on imported manufactured goods for most of the nineteenth century created serious difficulties. From the start, the nation was cash poor and the purchase of foreign goods continually drained the country of valuable specie. Critics constantly pointed to the ways in which the buying of imported goods tipped the balance of trade against the U.S., enriching England at America's expense. Yet throughout the century, proponents of commerce struck back. They argued that the revenue the government could raise by levying duties on the importation of foreign goods was a key resource for funding the public debt. In the wake

²⁴ Scholarship that highlights the ways in which the cultural context of material objects provides them with meaning includes Mary Douglas and Baron C. Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*, 1979 (New York: Routledge, 1996) and Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986)

of an expensive war, this was a significant advantage. Beyond the question of the nation's balance sheet lay a host of other problems connected to the question of manufacturing. Buying imported goods undermined the growing strength of domestic manufacturers who lost their business to the factories of Sheffield and Birmingham, but this same effect was heralded by some as preventing the growth of factory slums and urban decay in the United States. As such the consumption of imported goods posed a constant conundrum for Americans from the early republic to the Civil War.²⁵

Beyond economics, importing manufactured goods created political problems as well. In the early republic, harmonious political relations relied on balancing out the trinity of interests – commerce, manufacturing and agriculture – that dominated American political life.²⁶ Indeed, maintaining equilibrium was the core principle of early national political economy. But to keep the farmer and the mechanic happy by raising tariffs often meant denying the merchant the advantages of the free market. Conversely, political efforts to placate the merchant by abolishing the tariff undermined the country's infant manufacturing efforts. As a result, imported goods and their production became a lightning rod in political society, dividing Americans over the issues of protective tariffs, commercial restrictions, and other economic legislation. These problems only intensified as the prerogatives of the interests became more sectional in nature, with agricultural concerns increasingly represented by Southern and Western politicians and commerce and manufacturing finding an ever stronger voice in the Northeast.²⁷ As regional interests

²⁵ The best discussion of this is still McCoy, *The Elusive Republic* although he does not specifically look at consumption. On the balance of trade see Lipsey, "U.S. Trade and the Balance of Payments, 1800-1913"

²⁶ Matson and Onuf, *A Union of Interests*. See also Lawrence A. Peskin, *Manufacturing Revolution. The Intellectual Origins of Early American Industry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

²⁷ An older literature that explains the civil war as the clash between two systems of political economy, saw the fighting over these economic issues as the reason for the conflict. While the clash between the economies of slavery and free labor remain paramount in these interpretations, the focus on the modes of

began to diverge, the place of imported consumer goods became more contentious than ever.

While the provenance of these goods caused one set of problems, the very nature of these items caused another. At the root of this dilemma was whether the goods were luxuries or necessities, a debate that was essentially irresolvable, since luxury is a relative rather than ontological category. In the Western and particularly Christian tradition of thought, luxury had always been associated with moral failure and religious sin. But by the beginning of the eighteenth century the discussions surrounding luxury had taken on a more ambivalent tone. While many thinkers still associated luxury with moral corruption and spiritual decay, other thinkers, most famously Bernard Mandeville and later Adam Smith, saw new possibilities for the place of luxury in a nation's political economy. The former in particular made a case that luxury helped national economies to grow and the latter saw in "universal opulence" the signs of social progression and civilization.²⁸ These Enlightenment debates were magnified in the American setting. Critics of luxury goods highlighted the ways in which these items pushed citizens to excessive and sensuous indulgence, weakening their moral fiber. These same critics complained that purchasing these goods signaled a slavish dependence on a former colonial mistress, whose aesthetics and elitist habits no longer matched the new republican ethic that the United

labor have tended to obscure some of the ramifications of these long term disagreements over tariff and other market regulation in the antebellum period. For the classic interpretation of the civil war as capitalist clash is Charles Austin Beard and Mary Ritter Beard *The Rise of American Civilization* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927). See also Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery; Studies in the Economy & Society of the Slave South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965). The best work on free labor ideologies in the North is Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

²⁸ The literature on luxury is extensive. For the best recent work see Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger, eds., *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods* (New York: Palgrave, 2003). For the classic work see John Sekora, *Luxury: The concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

States hoped to cultivate. In contrast, proponents of these imported goods spoke of civilization, progress and domestic comfort, in short they held up a vision of the discerning consumer as an ideal citizen for the nation.

The citizens who found themselves grappling with these issues were white, wealthy, urban Americans, who self-consciously framed their choices as decisions on political culture or national economy. They found these goods problematic because they able to afford them but remained uncertain as to the virtue of their purchase. That is not to say that these white, wealthy citizens were single-mindedly dedicated to the cause of cultivating their relationship to their nation-state. Far from it. The politicians, merchants, auctioneers, manufacturers, boosters, retailers and consumers who grappled with these questions were often greedy or self-interested and motivated by commercial or political gain. In fact, it is the very mixture of commercial intentions and civic concern that this project seeks to uncover. Much like the presidential candidates of 2008, historians have often chosen to separate the world of market capitalism from the world of national service and citizenship. Scholarship divides these worlds into the history of the commercial and the history of the civic, overlooking the ways in which everyday citizens, past and present, prosaically intermingle the two. This project then, is an attempt to integrate these narratives and discover the ways in which American citizens demanded new freedoms and took on fresh obligations as consumers in a capitalist democracy.

The relationship between American commercial and civic life took shape in many places but the urban northeast and in particular New York and Philadelphia yield perhaps some of the most interesting and diverse insights into this process. The two biggest cities in

antebellum America, they boasted rapidly growing retail districts whose sophistication and fame drew tourists and visitors from within the country and abroad. Moreover, they were both manufacturing centers as well as bustling entrepôts, whose local economies linked them to broad hinterlands and wider regions across the country. The opening of the Erie canal in 1825 connected New York to the West and Philadelphia had long been the depot town for consumers in the South. The cities were home to different political parties and their citizens shared a mixture of economic interests.²⁹ They were also cultural centers, boasting printers, lithographers and publishing houses. This mixture of economic sway and cultural clout gave the citizens of these cities an unusual amount of power in defining the relationship between consumption and civic life.

Moreover both cities housed a broad range of laborers, craftsmen, retailers, merchants and professionals at a moment when changing modes of labor were altering the ways in which production gave meaning to class status. In this protean moment, consumption in urban centers became increasingly contentious, as shopping and material goods became a means for an increasingly anonymous urban population to classify one another. Indeed, making sense of shopping was a project that was particularly important to urban Americans, their ability to navigate society increasingly depended on their skills as consumers and readers of consumption. While their practices and ideas cannot stand in for the whole of the American experience, and certainly not the Southern experience, the stories that come from the cities of New York and Philadelphia reveal a central facet of the American relationship between consumption and citizenship.

²⁹ See Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-1850* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980); Lindstrom, *Economic Development in the Philadelphia Region*; Philip Scranton, *Proprietary Capitalism: The Textile Manufacture at Philadelphia, 1800-1885* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*.

The project is divided into three parts. Part One explores the years between the end of the Revolutionary War and the conclusion of the War of 1812. Beginning with the cultural and intellectual complications that surrounded the understanding of consumption in America, the first chapter sets these perceptions into context of the daily practices of shopping for new goods in the early Republic. The chapter shows how consumption intersected with understandings of civic belonging in the first decades of the nineteenth century, combining to create new tensions around moral engagement with the marketplace and fresh understandings of national character and behavior. The second chapter asks how these dilemmas of abundance took shape as policy and political discourse in a time of crisis, and argues that the War of 1812 forced Americans to acknowledge that it was both undesirable and impossible to cut themselves off from imported British goods. This concession shaped a new understanding of the consumer, one whose choices and purchases could finance the nation's endeavor to sustain independence, both politically and economically, from the European continent. Set against a backdrop of increasing international urgency, this chapter charts the ways in which politicians and newspaper editors grappled with the problem of national consumption of imported goods.

Part Two of the project examines how specific debates over the nature of the market and manufacturing in the U.S. shaped the evolving understanding of the consumer's civic role in American life. Chapter Three explores the little known struggle over auction houses that flared up on the east coast between 1817 and 1829. This commercial war between wholesale merchants and commercial auctioneers that erupted in the wake of the War of 1812, was motivated entirely by self interest and greed but had

the unexpected effect of re-shaping American understandings of citizens rights and obligations in the marketplace. The arguments which these two opposing groups made about market regulation and commercial imports seemed at first to be unconnected to the role of consumers, but by the early 1830s, the quarrel over auction regulation also entailed a discussion about how consumers could serve and be served as citizens by the national marketplace.

Chapter Four, takes up the problems of domestic manufacturing and commercial legislation that the auctioneers only touched on and explores the pro-tariff organizations of the Franklin Institute of Philadelphia and the American Institution of New York. These two societies, which flourished from 1824 onwards, were powerful cultural and political voices in the antebellum America, and their annual exhibitions of domestic manufactures provided Americans with a microcosm of a patriotic marketplace. Yet despite the best efforts of the Institutes to promulgate consumer interest in American productions and a self-sufficient, almost austere habit of consumption, the boosters and philanthropists failed. By starting with the institutional landscape that informed their mission and then charting the societies' efforts and eventual failure, it is possible to see how the participants in the annual exhibitions rejected the idea of self-restraint and the regulation of their consumption between the 1820s and the 1850s and pursued instead a vision of refined consumption of domestic goods in the name of national pride. Indeed, as Part Two argues, by mid-century American consumers had begun to ignore the ways in which their purchases figured in a larger political economy. Instead they started to envision a new role for themselves, where their acquisitions became representative of the nation's taste and sophistication.

In Part Three, the project charts the ascendancy of this new kind of consumer which emerged out of the growing commercial culture that took shape between the 1840s and 1860s. Chapter Five examines the role of advertisers and retailers had in creating a shared commercial culture for an urban audience in the 1840s and 50s. Engaging with and conforming to this culture of consumption became a way for the New Yorkers and Philadelphians to construct and lay claim to a middle-class identity. On the streets and in their homes, men and women involved themselves with the practices of shopping which over time came to signal their membership in a distinctly middle-class community. As retailers and advertisers helped to construct this middle-class shopper, free trade politicians also latched on to this culturally powerful figure and sought to give the consumer a political right to cheap goods as part of their anti-tariff argument. Putting these two discussions together, the chapter argues that the 1850s was the moment in which the middle-class consumer emerged as a figure with cultural and political capital in New York and Philadelphia.

Chapter Six explores the culmination of these trends in the Civil War. The conflict pushed the middle-class culture of consumption onto a national stage. As sectional tensions escalated in the 1850s Northern authors and advertisers contrasted the material cultures of free soil and slavery, making the former a symbol of American democracy in a moment when that democracy appeared to be under attack. This symbolism intensified during the war. Beginning in 1861, the Republicans instituted new tariff policies that made the consumption of thousands of goods and products, whether foreign or domestic, a way of contributing to the state's coffers. In contrast to Confederate policy which demanded frugality and self-denial from Southern citizens,

Union politicians made the consumption of daily luxuries into a civic obligation for citizens of the North.

This fusion of war time patriotism and consumption was not a simple act. Northern consumers understood that limitless self-indulgence was not acceptable. The public press treated those who enjoyed the fruits of war-time profiteering with ambivalent disdain. Their disgust was tempered with the uncomfortable realization that these consumers had paid taxes and were, in their own way, supporting the cause. These were uncomfortable truths that few chose to face. For many Americans, the problems of patriotic consumption were solved by their purchase of products and goods that trumpeted their support of the Union through their packaging and decoration. Moving away from the problems of production and political economy that had plagued earlier shoppers, these consumers fashioned their civic consumption out of symbolism and representation. Unlike the Revolutionary generation, the consumers of the 1860s never imagined that they might have to restrain their desire for new goods in the name of nation. Instead they expressed their personal allegiance to the Union through the purchase of patriotic trinkets, displaying their civic sentiment through the object itself. By uncoupling personal consumption from the imperatives of political economy, Northern consumers fundamentally altered the nature of consumption and civic belonging in America. In that act of disconnection, they laid the groundwork for the consumer culture that would dominate the twentieth century.

Chapter One

Dilemmas of Abundance. American understandings of consumption in a post-revolutionary world, 1790-1806.

In June 1807, a young man named Harmon Wendell obtained a little note book and began a “cursory account of private expenses.”¹ Wendell’s decision to start keeping track of his purchases likely stemmed from a number of different impulses. First of all, he was embarking on a new career as a clerk in Albany, New York and was probably eager to practice his own skills of accounting and penmanship. He filled the first few pages with elaborate curlicues and detailed borders, even decorating his own name, which he inscribed on the inside front page. But within a couple of pages he was down to serious business, earnestly noting what he was buying and how much it cost him, adding up the figures and jotting down the total. It was an excellent exercise for an aspiring young clerk. Wendell might also have wanted to keep track of his own spending. Beginning a new job and earning money of his own, perhaps for the first time, he may have felt

¹ Harmon Wendell, *Account Book*, New-York Historical Society, New York, NY (hereafter N-YHS) 1-2.

entitled to a few new purchases but he could not afford to get into debt. Thus the account book served a dual purpose, helping him practice his trade as he guarded, as best he could, against overspending.

If Wendell did have any anxieties about debt they did not appear to be paramount. As part of a small spending spree that June, Wendell purchased a “summer hat,” “1 Summer ribbon, bl[a]ck,” as well as a penknife, a cane, two vests with trimmings and a pair of gaiters with black cuffs. But the biggest purchase came on the 18th of the month, when he spent over ten pounds on an English silver watch and watch chain. To mark the importance of the acquisition, Wendell wrote down the name of the watchmaker and the watch’s number, alongside the entry recording its purchase.² Clearly the watch was an important investment and Wendell’s notation revealed a certain pride in his new possession. After June 1807, Wendell’s pattern of consumption settled into more of a routine. He bought linens, wools and other fabrics to make and trim his clothes. He collected books and spent his money on shoes, umbrellas, lottery tickets, apples, lemon tarts and even the occasional “jaunt to Waterford.” Of course these items soon began to add up, occasionally to more than he could afford. At one point, he noted that he had borrowed £16.00 from his mother, “to be reimbursed as soon as my empty purse is replenished.” But it is unlikely that Wendell felt guilty about his mother’s help since he himself had lent his mother and his sister money in the past. In all, the life reflected in Harmon Wendell’s account book lived up to the motto which he had inscribed in the front of his account book when he had first bought it: “Self-satisfaction is highly commendable even necessary.” The maxim provided a succinct summary and neat

² *Ibid*, 3.

validation of Wendell's economic decisions as they unfurled on the pages of his account book over the years.³

Wendell's slightly self-conscious motto suggests that as a consumer this clerk imagined himself as an independent individual, free to make his own decisions as a shopper. Indeed, Wendell's epigram hinted at a man who pursued his own satisfaction without constraint and believed that pursuit to be not simply praiseworthy, but "necessary." Such a description provides a striking portrait of the American consumer at the turn of the nineteenth century, a vision of a liberal individual, who validated his personal inclinations through a claim of necessity and justified his "self-satisfaction" as virtuous in its own way. Yet the motto turned out not to match the confident assertion of economic independence. Indeed, despite his jaunty injunction to satisfy himself, Wendell's account book reveals that he, like many other American consumers at the time, was enmeshed in an economy of debt and dependence. He was reliant on his family for economic help, just as they were on him. These ties of obligation and duty were not limited to his family. On occasion the clerk bought items that he offered to creditors in lieu of payment as a way of settling existing accounts. At other times, he noted purchases that were intended as favors or gifts that he owed to friends. Thus, despite the large number of purchases that Wendell seemed to make by himself, for himself, Wendell's declaration of self-satisfaction, surrounded by boyish curlicues, did not always correspond to his life as a shopper. Instead, his purchases were often a way to satisfy his communal obligations, and not a liberal assertion of individual selfhood at all.

The way in which Wendell used his motto to obscure his debts and dependencies is not surprising. In the opening decades of the nineteenth century, economic

³ *Ibid.* 23, 31, 35.

independence was highly valued by the majority of Americans but hard to attain.

Wendell, like many others, had to face the restraining realities of interdependence even as he expressed his personal aspirations for self-satisfaction. Yet the scholarship that has examined consumption in Revolutionary American history has not fully acknowledged the power that these compromises had in shaping what it meant to be a consumer in the early republic. In particular, the scholarship of T.H Breen, which has done so much to reveal the inner workings of the politics of consumption, has argued that the Revolution, with its extraordinary politics of non-importation and non-consumption, turned American consumers into independent liberal subjects, who imagined their consumption as an assertion of their economic and ultimately political selves. Indeed, Breen has called the Revolution a “key moment in the history of liberal thought,” seeing in the dramatic displays of consumer defiance an instant when Americans transferred a liberal subjectivity and discourse about rights and powers onto the new egalitarian consumer marketplace.⁴

Yet the complete nature of this transformation is belied by an examination of American consumers and the practice of consumption in the post-war nation. Far from being a powerful political and cultural figure in the post-colonial political economy, the identity and role of the consumer was uncertain. Both on a level of individual experience and national significance, the consumer in America did not encapsulate liberal selfhood. Instead, the consumer lived in a world that remained ambivalent about the “necessity” of self-satisfaction in two ways. First, because the idea that a consumer could use their shopping to assert a politically independent identity sat uneasily with the communal and

⁴ T.H Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumption Shaped American Independence* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). See particularly 23-25.

interdependent way a shopper navigated the market in early America. Second, because satisfaction and pleasure in the art of shopping were ideas that were only slowly gaining currency in a world where Enlightenment understandings of consumption battled with older suspicions of luxury and enjoyment of the material world. Although faced with an expanding world of consumer goods, Americans living in a post-colonial political economy confronted what might best be termed a dilemma of abundance. Encountering both new environments in which to consume and new ideas about consumption itself, those Americans who could afford to consume beyond necessity, struggled to fashion a form of consumption that reflected the newly independent nation's political economy and culture without jettisoning their older ties of obligation and dependence that bound them together as families, friends and communities.

This chapter begins by arguing that the familiar texts of liberal political economy in the eighteenth century, most notably Adam Smith, have been in part responsible for the mischaracterization of the consumer in America in the early republic. Smith's influential discussion of a new kind of market society, *The Wealth of Nations*, was by no means an unabashed endorsement of the commercial society of the late eighteenth century. But Smith's work did give new legitimacy to consumption. The idea that consumption could promote wealth, sustain economic growth, and even have a beneficial effect on the strength of a nation had begun as far back as 1714, with the publication of Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*. By the time Smith's *Wealth of Nations* appeared in 1776, the legitimacy of consumption was well established in elite intellectual circles. Indeed, the pursuit of self-interest in the marketplace as a means to create a "universal opulence" made sense in both Europe and America, where luxury manufactured goods existed in

new profusion.⁵ But this new intellectual enthusiasm for consumption was not matched by a corresponding interest in the figure of the consumer. Smith, far more focused on production and the division of labor, simply imagined the consumer as the same kind of self-interested individual that dominated the world of production and commerce, and failed to look beyond his original formulation.

Looking beyond Smith, this chapter shows that the wealthy consumer in the early republic was no self-interested liberal individual. By exploring the practices and conventions that Americans used to navigate an expanding world of goods, this chapter argues that Americans imagined their consumption as part of a world of obligation and self-regulation, of desire mingled with restraint. This was especially true of wealthy families who faced particular problems when it came to both getting and spending, since their efforts to achieve a gentility becoming to their status often clashed with the calls for republican frugality that emerged in the wake of the Revolution. By focusing on these families in particular, this chapter examines the heart of the dilemma Americans faced when it came to consumption. Moreover, by interrogating a different set of texts on consumption that American readers used to find their way through the expanding marketplace – texts on etiquette, fashion and domestic economy – this chapter explores

⁵ See Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger, eds., *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century. Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods* (New York: Palgrave, 2007) 1-23; Jerry Z. Muller, *The Mind and the Market: Capitalism in Modern European Thought* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002) 51-83. The literature on the consumer revolution of the 18th century is expansive, see in particular: Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J.H Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1982); Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992) and Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds., *Of Consuming Interests. The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1994).

how American grappled with the dilemmas of abundance on a daily basis and began to construct their own vision of a newly American consumer in the early republic.

American readers who might have picked up *The Wealth of Nations* must have been eager for some kind of guidance when it came to understanding the political nature and place of American consumption. They lived in a perplexing world. American confusion over the politics and practice of consumption was for the most part the legacy of the Revolution. Beginning in 1765 with the Stamp Act crisis, the successive waves of non-importation and ultimately non-consumption sentiment that had washed over the colonies had politicized Americans' material lives in new ways. Popular rhetoric lionized consumers who refrained from purchasing new goods, especially those imported from Britain. Economic self-reliance took on new virtue and domestic manufacturing became synonymous with both commercial and national advantage. Nonetheless, Americans argued furiously over what kinds of items should be laid aside. While many agreed that luxury was a corrupting force, few could agree on what exactly constituted "a luxurious good." Moreover, passionate rhetoric did not always translate into faithful adherence to principle. Benjamin Franklin himself, promised the House of Commons in 1766 that America could empower itself through a disciplined rejection of the "Baubles of Britain," only to spend a small fortune on silks and satins as well as a fashionable Turkey Rug for his home in Philadelphia.⁶ In short then, there was confusion throughout the

⁶ The best discussion of this phenomenon is Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution*. On the example of Franklin's dilemma see *Ibid.*, 195-200.

Revolutionary period over what constituted a good consumer, which persisted through the War of Independence and left consumers with a perplexing legacy.⁷

In the postcolonial period these problems did not disappear. Despite gaining political independence, Americans quickly confronted the fact that they had not in truth gained real economic independence.⁸ By 1783, it was clear that the hope of a commercial world anchored in free trade was a pipe dream. America remained dependent on Britain for their manufactured goods and the British crown seemed determined to exploit that dependency. In that same year Britain passed an Order in Council that denied the United States any of their former commercial privileges, a decision that was particularly devastating since it denied the U.S. the opportunity to trade freely with the West Indies.⁹ Nor could the Americans hope that this was a temporary punishment for their newly won independence. In the same year, Lord Sheffield published *Observations on the Commerce of the American States*, a pamphlet that made it clear that Sheffield, like other conservative English politicians, hoped to reconstruct the economy of the empire, excluding the newly formed United States from free trade with the British within the Atlantic trading triangle through a series of tariffs and exclusions.¹⁰ Sheffield concluded that England could create an “invisible empire,” and that only the weak and dependent

⁷ For an excellent discussion of the confusion over the legacy of the Revolution see Linzy Brekke, “‘To Make a Figure’: Clothing and the Politics of Male Identity in Eighteenth-Century America,” in John Styles and Amanda Vickery, eds., *Gender, Taste and Material Culture in Britain and North America, 1700-1830* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 225-226.

⁸ Burton Spivak, *Jefferson's English Crisis. Commerce, Embargo and Republican Revolution* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1979), 2; Drew R. McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 209.

⁹ Robert E. Lipsey, “U.S. Trade and the Balance of Payments, 1800-1913,” in *The Cambridge Economic History of the United States*, ed., Stanley Engerman and Robert E. Gallman, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 2:685-6.

¹⁰ J.C. A. Stagg, “James Madison and the Coercion of Great Britain: Canada, the West Indies and the War of 1812,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 38 (Jan. 1981): 7.

America, who relied utterly on Britain for all of its consumer goods would suffer from this exclusion.¹¹

The British reckoning was correct to the extent that America was incapable of producing its own consumer goods. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the United States was above all an agricultural nation. Only ten per cent of the nation lived in urban areas in 1801 and most of America's production of finished goods was done in the home, in the form of textile production.¹² Thus nearly all of American's consumer goods came from abroad. These goods included nearly all woolen textiles, all printed cotton textiles, silks, linens, plated ware, china, glass, cutlery, hardware, ribbons, hats, and even shoe buckles. As such, buying finished manufactured goods in the early republic meant that the consumer of these items was linked inextricably to the difficulties that the fledgling nation was experiencing in the hostile world of transatlantic commerce. In short, the conundrum of consumption in America was closely tied to the problems of production, a fact that would remain true right through to the Civil War. The question of how to situate the consumption of these goods in the new nation's political economy was thus one that posed serious problems for individuals who considered the conundrums of American economic independence and the role that consumption would have in ensuring that independence.

Philosophical and moral inquiries into the nature of consumption were not new to the eighteenth century. Intellectual efforts to make sense of this ubiquitous phenomenon had roots in both the classical and Hebraic traditions. Both Platonic and Aristotelian

¹¹ Quote from Roger G. Kennedy, *Mr. Jefferson's Lost Cause: Land, Farmers, Slavery and the Louisiana Purchase* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 102 and Stagg, "James Madison and the Coercion of Great Britain," 8.

¹² Walter Licht, *Industrializing America: The Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 1-4.

thought condemned commerce as self-interest and thus a base distraction for men who ought to be serving the public good. But commerce was not simply a distraction. It was a means to an end and that end was luxury: an insatiable constellation of desires and self-indulgences that overruled men's independent thought and rationality. As a result, Greek philosophers in particular could find no way to reconcile consumption with good citizenship. Similarly, Hebraic traditions identified luxury with desire and disobedience, arguing that only a suppression of luxury could ensure good moral order. These attitudes persisted over the centuries in a broad Christian critique that identified accumulating wealth as covetousness and acquiring objects as giving in to sinful desire. While attitudes towards private property changed and softened over time, a stark condemnation of luxury as a cardinal sin remained in place.¹³

The political economy of the eighteenth century marked a new moment in intellectual understandings of consumption in European thought.¹⁴ In particular, a group of Scottish philosophers, the most famous of whom was Adam Smith, found a new way to frame consumption that fundamentally altered the ways in which both European, and later American, men of letters related getting and spending to moral and political economy. Although Smith and his peers may have surprised the reading public, it is unsurprising now to see why these Scots began to promote the practice of consumption. By the mid-eighteenth century, Europeans could no longer deny that the material world of goods which they occupied had begun to change in noticeable ways. New fabrics from

¹³ Joyce Appleby, "Consumption in Early Modern Social Thought," in *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*, ed. Laurence B. Glickman, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 134-136; Muller, *The Mind and the Market*, 4-16.

¹⁴ For the best survey of European political economy in this period as a whole see McCoy, *The Elusive Republic*, 13-47. See also Michael Kwass, "Ordering the World of Goods: Consumer Revolution and the Classification of Objects," *Representations*, 82 (Spring 2003): 87-116; John E. Crowley, *The Invention of Comfort: Sensibilities and Design in Early Modern Britain and Early America* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 141-170.

India arrived every day. Their exotic names – Calicos, Romalls, Alligeers, Bengals, Gujarat Baftas and dozens more – lined the pages of newspaper advertisements and soon the textiles themselves sat on the warehouse shelves of Europe as demand for these colorful, light cotton and silk textiles spiraled upwards.¹⁵ The trade in Indian fabrics was supplemented by the importation of porcelain, lumber, coffee, tea, chocolate and other new commodities from Asia and the Americas. Merchants and manufacturers quickly learned how to profit from these new imports. Manufacturers such as Josiah Wedgwood perfected an imitation of the expensive porcelain of China, providing creamware copies of enviable tableware for a large market of eager consumers in England and America.¹⁶ But as quickly as merchants and manufacturers adapted, the demand of European and American consumers increased and changed. The massive expansion in domestic consumption led men like Adam Smith to reconsider the phenomenon of consumption and the place of the market more broadly in civic life.

The first step was to argue that the modern commercial system was not antithetical to civic virtue. Smith made it clear that classical notions of the marketplace as crass and base were unfounded, and that the market was an arena in which men could exercise their natural propensity to barter, trade and generally pursue their self-interest. Unlike earlier intellectuals, Adam Smith did not assume that self interest was incompatible with maintaining a moral polity. Instead he argued that self-interest could be construed as private virtue, a stronger expression of virtue because it promoted care

¹⁵ Florence M. Montgomery, *Textiles in America, 1650-1870* (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1984), 143, 152, 163, 184.

¹⁶ Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *Imagining Consumers: Design and Innovation from Wedgwood to Corning* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 1-14. For other examples of how new imports shaped the creation of new consumer goods see Dena Goodman, "Furnishing Discourses: Readings of a Writing Desk in Eighteenth Century France," in Berg and Eger, eds., *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century*, 71-88.

for those known to you, rather than those unknown, as public virtue demanded. Smith then argued that self-interest allowed individuals to harness their own productive energy, creating a polity where the living standards of all were raised, thus forging a commercial society that provided materially for the common good.¹⁷

Smith had his reservations about the ways in which the pursuit of self-interest might define modern society. He was particularly concerned about the way the division of labor would strip production of its dignity and producers of their integrity. But despite his concerns about production, which dominate the entire work, Smith's attitudes to consumption were remarkably uncomplicated and he paid the question of "demand" scant attention compared to his focus on "supply." He did not ignore it entirely however. "Consumption," wrote Smith, "is the sole end and purpose of all production and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to, only so far as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer. The maxim is so perfectly self-evident, that it would be absurd to prove it."¹⁸ For Smith then, the consumer drove the progression of market society forward, and their demands stimulated an economy better than any governmental tariff ever could. Through his understanding of these mechanisms, Smith found it easy to promote consumption as an integral part of a functioning economy.

Smith did not necessarily admire the morality of consumption. He acknowledged that it could be inspired by envy or misplaced admiration and could easily run to wanton and destructive excess. Smith did not want to encourage lazy self-indulgence, more an

¹⁷ Appleby, "Consumption in Early Modern Thought," 137; Muller, *The Mind and the Market*, 51- 83; Paul K. Conklin, *Prophets of Prosperity. America's First Political Economists* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1980), 17-26; Samuel Fleischacker, "Adam Smith's Reception among the American Founders, 1776-1790," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 59 (Oct. 2002): 916.

¹⁸ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* intro. Robert Reich, ed. Edwin Cannan, rev.ed. (1776; repr., New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 715. Quote also discussed in Appleby, "Consumption in Early Modern Thought," 138.

active effort on everybody's part to aspire to comfort and a good standard of living. But he did see the desire for new things as a constant, and it was this constant that would ensure the engine of commercial society would continue to run. Although his notion of self-interest was configured more around the idea of pursuing wealth than the act of consumption, Smith did not condemn the idea that the self-interested pursuit of wealth facilitated consumption. Drawing on the Enlightenment notion that worldly happiness was a good thing, Smith stated finally that not only was universal opulence a moral good rather than a Christian sin, but that the very measure of a nation's wealth and strength was the purchasing power of its consumers.

Smith published *An Inquiry into the Wealth of Nations* in 1776, just as the American Revolution was coming to a head. While there is some evidence that Smith influenced the thinking of the Founding Fathers during that crucial period between 1776 and 1790, the broader dissemination of his work and thought did not take place until the 1790s.¹⁹ While it is almost impossible to discern all the ways in which Smith's work moved into a broader public discussion of political economy it is significant that after 1792, *The Wealth of Nations* started to appear in the catalogues of American booksellers as well as on the lists of circulating libraries and that his name was invoked more frequently in political discussions of domestic manufacturing and federal policy towards trade.²⁰ Smith's ideas also circulated, albeit second hand, through the work of other

¹⁹ Most historians of this period have not argued for a strong Smithian influence on the founding fathers. For a more recent and convincing refutation of this argument see Fleischacker, "Adam Smith's Reception among the American Founders, 1776-1790."

²⁰ See for example, *Poor Will's almanack, for the year of our Lord 1793* (Philadelphia: Printed and Sold by Joseph Crukshank, No. 87, High Street [1792]), 45; Benjamin Banneker, *Banneker's almanack and ephemeris for the year of our Lord 1793* (Philadelphia: Printed and Sold by Joseph Crukshank, No. 87, High-Street, [1792]), 45; Hugh Gaine, *Hugh Gaine's Catalogue of Books, lately imported from England, Ireland and Scotland, and to be Sold at his book store and printing office, at the Bible in Hanover-Square*. (New York: Gaines, 1792), 6; William Spotswood, *William Spotswood's catalogue of books &c for sale on*

political economists. After the publication of *The Wealth of Nations* nearly every other political economist felt compelled to respond, even when their reaction was unfavorable. Charles Ganilh, a French political economist whose work - *An Inquiry into the Various Systems of Political Economy* - was reprinted in America for the first time in 1812, applied a stringent mercantilist critique to Smith's work, but even in his opposition helped to circulate Smithian philosophy.²¹ Ganilh's work even conceded that "consumption [was] the measure of production," and that "a produce which finds no consumer, is not long reproduced."²² Similarly, a more ardent supporter of Smith, Jean Baptiste Say, promoted his colleague's work, particularly in America. Say was a close friend of Benjamin Franklin, and this relationship helped bring the ideas of the Scottish philosopher to the attention of the American statesman.

But for all this attention, Smith's work did not really engage with the problems that Americans were experiencing in the postcolonial marketplace. Smith's uncomplicated vision of the consumer simply presented Americans with a man who spent his money as part of some innate impulse for new things. After all, this insatiable desire

the most reasonable terms at No. 55 Marlborough Street, the fifth house below Mr. Salisbury's hardware-store. Also a variety of the best stationary ware. To country book-sellers, shop-keepers, purchasers for social libraries, and others who buy in quantity, a considerable abatement will be made from the usual retail prices. (Boston: [William Spotswood], 1795), 27; For the sale of Adam Smith's other work *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* see Thomas S. Arden, *Thomas S. Arden's sale catalogue of books: consisting of a very general collection of valuable books, in every branch of science and polite literature, ancient and modern; which he will sell, wholesale & retail, on reasonable terms, at his book and stationary store, no. 186, Pearl-Street, New-York.* (New York: James Oran, 1801), 39; E. & S. Larkin, *Catalogue of books for sale by E. and S. Larkin no. 47, Cornhill, Boston, consisting of the most esteemed authors, and arranged under the following headings, viz. law, divinity, surgery ...* (Boston: Printed for E. & S. Larkin, 1802), 43; John Edmund Harwood, *A catalog of Harwood's circulating library comprising a choice selection of the most approved modern books...* (Philadelphia: Printed by William Duane, 1803), 22.

²¹ For an overview of when critical works of political economy were reprinted in America see Esther Lowenthal, "American Reprints of Economic Writings, 1776-1848," *The American Economic Review*, 42 (Dec. 1952): 876-880 and Esther Lowenthal, "Additional American Reprints of Economic Writings 1776-1848," *The American Economic Review*, 43 (Dec. 1953): 884.

²² Charles Ganilh, *An Inquiry into the Various Systems of Political Economy; Their Advantages and Disadvantages; and the Theory Most Favorable to the Increase of National Wealth*, trans., D. Boileau, (New York: Peter A. Mesier, 1812), 179-80.

to always aspire to “opulence” was the engine that Smith credited with driving a nation’s economy forward. Smith having justified the place of luxury goods in the modern economy, had failed to parse the questions of who should buy what goods, what items and lifestyle befit an emerging republic and how to incorporate foreign-made goods into a nation that was struggling to maintain its economic and cultural independence. But these were the problems that Americans were facing, and as an examination of the early republican marketplace reveals, they were not facing them as self-interested, independent liberal consumers.

A better understanding of how Americans with means shopped in the early nineteenth century provides some insight into why newly forged American citizens might have imagined consumption as an act fraught with obligation and dependency. The concept of self-satisfaction, as Harmon Wendell would have been well aware, was not a simple injunction in a marketplace where every consumer was shaped and influenced by an overlapping network of economic, social and cultural checks and balances. Decisions on what you bought, when you bought and even how and why you bought it were all mediated by a web of relationships with family, friends and acquaintances. From the initial act of browsing to the final use of any new purchase, the act of satisfying yourself as a consumer was a process of constant navigation that made personal choice a practice fraught with complication.²³

²³ Some new scholarship is beginning to lay bare these constraints and question the idea that consumers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were the autonomous and self-pleasing individual that dominates our understanding of consumers in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. See especially Ellen Hartigan-O’Connor, “Collaborative Consumption and Politics of Choice in Early American Port Cities” in Vickery and Styles, eds., *Gender, Taste and Material Culture in Britain and North America, 1700-1830*, 125-149; Claire Walsh, “Shops, Shopping and the Art of Decision Making in Eighteenth Century England” in Vickery and Styles, eds. *Gender, Taste and Material Culture*, 152-173; Ann Smart

Choosing the goods for yourself was the first hurdle for most shoppers, particularly those who lived outside the major cities of the east coast. Even the most simple and perhaps personal choice could often be dependent on someone else. Writing in her diary in November 1800, Anna Thornton noted that “Mr. Stickney called to let us know he was going to Baltimore tomorrow morning. – Dr. T. commissioned him to purchase a pattern of Cloth for a Coat.”²⁴ While Anna Thornton’s entry is brief, it reveals a complex relationship to choosing and purchasing a good. Stickney’s visit before his journey suggests that he had arrived at the Thornton’s home with the intention of discovering whether the family needed any items to be picked out and purchased in Baltimore. Despite living in Washington, Anna Thornton had not been impressed with the “poor little stores” of the brand new capital.²⁵ Small wonder since in 1800, the capital was little more than a muddy building site. The chance to have access, however mediated, to the grander and more sophisticated stores of Baltimore was both useful and exciting, and Stickney’s visit presented a welcome opportunity for the Thornton family, something Stickney would surely have realized. Nonetheless, the occasion was noteworthy enough to suggest that Thornton himself may have been waiting some time for a new coat. When access to the right sorts of goods was limited, personal desire for new items would be drastically curtailed by simple opportunity.

The sparse notation also alerts us to the fact that Thornton trusted Stickney to pick out a suitable fabric for his coat. While choosing a coat may seem like a highly individual choice, Thornton’s decision to charge Stickney with the task of picking out the cloth for

Martin, “Ribbons of Desire: Gendered Stories in the World of Goods,” in Vickery and Styles, eds. *Gender, Taste and Material Culture*, 179-200.

²⁴ Anna Maria Brodeau Thornton, *Diary of Mrs. William Thornton, 1800-1863* (District of Columbia: Columbia Historical Society, 1907), 208.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

the garment suggests that every shopper, whether male or female, relied on someone else's judgment at some point, making their decision a "collaborative choice."²⁶ These collaborations were more often ones that took place within the family network. The efforts of Eliza Southgate Bowne on behalf of her family reveal that the business of buying on behalf of others was both a pleasure and an intense responsibility. Eliza Southgate, a young woman originally from Scarborough, Maine, married a New York Quaker, Robert Bowne in May 1803. By December that same year they had set up a home in the city and Eliza, more than ever, became a crucial conduit for her family whenever they needed goods of any kind. Although usually charged with sending home clothing or patterns, the occasion of her brother Horatio's marriage coinciding with her sister, Octavia, setting up house with her new husband, prompted a far more important commission and Bowne found herself attempting to order furniture, plate, and household goods ranging from damask napkins to pearl tea pots.²⁷

Bowne's difficulty throughout this process was juggling her perceived notions of her family's taste with what was available. She prided herself on bargain hunting but did not want thrift to stand in the way of fashionable acquisition. "Yesterday the Silversmith came for instructions respecting the plate, and bro't patterns for me to look at," she wrote to her sister in November of 1805. "I ordered a set of tea-things for Mamma the same as mine; I think them handsomer than any I see. The man is to send me some patterns to look at which he thinks are similar to your description."²⁸ Trying to match her family's expectations to what the silversmith could offer, Bowne faithfully attempted to execute a

²⁶ Hartigan-O Connor, "Collaborative Consumption and the Politics of Choice in Early American Port Cities."

²⁷ Eliza Southgate Bowne, *A Girl's Life Eighty Years Ago: Selections from the Letters of Eliza Southgate Bowne*, intro. Clarence Cook, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1888), 201-202.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 204.

commission which was both economically and culturally a huge investment for the family. Not only had her father sent her husband, Robert Bowne, \$340 for the purposes of this purchase, a vast sum of money, but the plate would be an indication to friends and acquaintances of the Southgate's taste and connections. It is little wonder then, that Bowne's letter to her sister urged her to reply "immediately." She did not want to make any mistakes.²⁹

Throughout November 1805, Eliza Southgate Bowne worked to make the choices and purchases for her family that she thought would reflect well on them and satisfy their shared sense of economy. Having finally packed up the bundle of goods, ready to go to Maine she wrote again to her sister:

The sheeting is quite as cheap as mine, the fine I like very much, and think it quite a bargain. The Diaper is not quite so cheap as mine, but it has risen...[t]he Cake Basket is very cheap, \$2 cheaper than mine, and rather handsomer I think. I could get no crimson marking, but send you a few skeins of cotton which I procured with much difficulty. The napkins are not the kind I wished, but there was none of those excepting at 2 places, and they were 18/--22/ a piece. I thought these pretty and would answer your purpose.³⁰

Bowne had done all she could to match Octavia's request with what was cheap and available in New York, without compromising what her sister had hoped for. The difficulty in finding "crimson marking," a coveted color because of the difficulties Americans had in producing home grown red dyes for fabric, had forced her to find something else, but clearly Eliza had realized how important the substitute was to her sister. She had spared no effort in trying to satisfy her sister's desires. But ultimately Bowne had made purchases on behalf of her extended family and not any one individual at all.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 203.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 206.

Eliza Southgate Bowne's difficulties in finding what was asked of her, suggest a further difficulty consumers may have had in "satisfying themselves." Even those shoppers who found they could enjoy regular access to stores might not be able to find the goods they wanted. Shortages were a regular theme of complaint, not only among shoppers but among the retailers and merchants themselves, who struggled to match demand as it shifted and changed sometimes without warning. Philadelphia commission merchant James Weems wrote an apologetic letter to a client – William Harris – in Chestertown, Maryland in December 1810, trying to explain why so little of Harris' order had been completed. "Inclosed [sic] you have a bill of all the articles that could be procured at present," explained Weems. "[T]he furniture Callico [sic] I looked in at least 200 Stores for and found none that would make a tolerable match. But on Monday I hope to have better success as I shall go myself one way and send my young man another, till we find it, if tis' to be had." The letter continued, more an inventory of failures than anything else. Silk caps were scarce, the furniture fringe was not the kind Harris had asked for and instead of milled flannel, Weems sent the closest thing he could find: swanskin.³¹ Weems, like many other merchants and middlemen, tried to match supply with demand, but often the vagaries of trade, particularly with so many merchants waiting on new shipments from England or Europe, meant that what was wanted and what could be procured were two very different things.

Even when goods were on hand, not every consumer could be sure of getting what they wanted. In an economy anchored on a deeply entrenched system of credit and debt, personal and familial good standing defined an individual's relationship to the

³¹ James Weems to William Harris, Dec. 15, 1810, *James Weems Letterbook, 1810-1814*, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (hereafter HSP).

market. These economic relations dictated the decision to purchase more often than any inclination to self-satisfaction. As Wendell's own account book showed, personal debts amongst family and friends could prevent further spending sprees if outstanding amounts were owed. This was particularly the case if individuals had accounts with local shopkeepers that had remained unsettled for too long a period.³² As historian Ann Smart Martin has noted, in the small rural stores of Virginia, a retailer might not only refuse to sell more goods to people who owed great amounts, but judging from the relative credit-worthiness of any given individual, the store owner might only show a shopper certain goods. Since most storekeepers in the 1800s kept their stock behind a counter, perhaps in an ill lit room which made it impossible for consumers to see to what was available at the back of the store, a retailer's decision not to open a package or bring only a limited selection of ribbons and buttons out onto the counter, made a massive impact on what any one browser might find themselves choosing and buying. This was even more true for larger commissions ordered from artisans. No silversmith or cabinet maker would embark on a project, if they believed that the customer could not pay. If they did, they would soon be out of business.³³

It was not simply merchants who could prevent a customer's access to the world of goods. Husbands, fathers or brothers could all prevent a female relation from buying goods on their accounts if they wanted to. While married women relied on the "law of necessities" – a convention that enabled them to make any purchases they believed to be

³² On the widespread existence of book debt as the controlling mechanism of rural exchange see Michael Merrill, "Cash Is Good To Eat: Self-Sufficiency and Exchange in the Rural Economy of the United States," *Radical History Review*, 3 (Fall 1976): 42-71; Christopher Clark, "Household Economy, Market Exchange and the Rise of Capitalism in the Connecticut Valley, 1800-1860," *Journal of Social History*, 13 (Winter 1979): 169-189; Naomi Lamoreaux, "Rethinking the Transition to Capitalism," *Journal of American History*, 90 (Sep. 2003): 437-441.

³³ Martin, "Ribbons of Desire," 182.

necessary for their household without their husband's direct consent – this did not ensure that women could obtain unfettered access to the marketplace. It was not uncommon to see small notices in the newspapers, where husbands warned local merchants that they would no longer settle any bills run up by their wives. If a woman was trapped in a failing marriage or took a chance and deserted her husband, she could effectively be cut off from consuming altogether.³⁴ But more often the network of credit and debt operated more as a check than as outright prevention. The complicated finances of Francis Silvester, a wealthy Federalist lawyer from Kinderhook, NY, illuminate some of the ways in which purchases, and women's purchases in particular, could be mediated by their familial ties, in spite of substantial wealth and standing. This was certainly the case for Jane Silvester, Francis Silvester's mother. When Francis took over the family estate, the financial well-being of his mother fell into his hands. Jane Silvester had originally been a Van Schaak, a woman of good family and wealth in her own right. It was in fact her father's property that her son Francis was now managing. This meant that while Jane Silvester did have her own funds, it was usually her son who paid the bills and then took the money from his mother's own pool of resources. Francis Silvester's specific accounting reveals that he kept track of his mother's purchases by paying her bills and then immediately debiting her account. As soon as he paid \$1.00 for a pair of her shoes, he instantly noted that Jane owed him \$1.00. Nothing seemed to escape Francis

³⁴ See for example "Caution," *The Aurora General Advertiser* Nov. 27, 1806; "A Caution," *Poulson's Daily America Advertiser* Apr. 8, 1812. See also Hartigan O'Connor, "Collaborative Consumption and the Politics of Choice in Early Modern Port Cities," 131.

Silvester's notice. Even the oranges and oysters that Jane ordered from John Bleekman went into his account book.³⁵

But relationships of financial obligation and permission were not always organized along such clear gendered lines. In some cases women could open their own accounts with shopkeepers. For example, one New-York shopkeeper, John Valentine, listed eight women who had their own accounts at his shop, out of a total of 325 customers.³⁶ Independent shopping for women was a possibility. But more often women might look to other female relatives, in positions of greater financial power, to enable their shopping. Some of the purchases that Jane Silvester made for example, illustrate how younger women relied on the patronage of older women to ensure they got what they wanted. When Catherine Sophia Silvester wanted 3 ½ yards of Bombazette and two skeins of thread, it was Jane Silvester who bought them and put them on her account, which Francis Silvester promptly noted and duly debited from his mother's funds.³⁷ Jane was also responsible for ensuring that her married daughter, Maria Wynkoop, was able to get the 6 yards of silk she needed for a gown. It is worth noting that Maria's husband, Augustus, was not noted in this transaction. Once again, Francis paid for the material and immediately noted that Jane owed him the money. Whether Maria had requested the cloth or Jane had decided to give it as a gift, the transaction still represents a moment when Maria had been able to get her hands on a new dress without the help of her husband.³⁸

Financial arrangements such as this meant that satisfying yourself depended on the good

³⁵ Francis Silvester, *Daybook of F. Silvester and A. Wynkoop*, N-YHS. On shoes see Mar. 19, 1817; on oranges and oysters see Oct. 4, 1815

³⁶ John Valentine, *Account Book, 1807-1817*, N-YHS.

³⁷ A bombazette was a light weight woolen fabric, similar to a worsted, but unglazed. They arrived in America in the early 1800s and were valued both for their novelty and their range of colors. See Montgomery, *Textiles in America*, 172.

³⁸ Silvester, *Daybook*, N-YHS. For Catherine Sophie Silvester see Apr. 3, 1817; for Maria Wynkoop see June 1, 1816.

will or economic capabilities of others. For women in particular, choices about goods would be filtered through a set of expectations about what kind of credit they could practically have access to.

While economic considerations would have placed one set of constraints on shoppers of all kinds, social networks and relationships also played their part in shaping the ways in which a consumer approached the marketplace. The experience of two teenage sisters from Lebanon Connecticut, illustrates how the very purpose of social connections was in part to introduce uninitiated young women to the wonders of a new marketplace. Harriet and Maria Trumbull arrived in New York city in December 1800, daughters of the prominent Federalist and former Revolutionary general – Jonathan Trumbull. Their father had arranged for them to live as paying guests with the widow, Lady Kitty Duer, wife of the disgraced William Duer, whose role in the panic of 1792 had left his widow financially strapped despite her excellent social connections. If the Trumbulls had believed that Lady Kitty would introduce them to New York society they were disappointed. Too busy putting her own life back together, the aristocratic widow left the young women largely to their own devices. But the Trumbull girls were not without resources. They quickly made friends with Eliza Sebor, the wife of a wealthy merchant, originally from Connecticut himself. It was Mrs. Sebor who became the girls' guide and patron as they found their bearings in the exciting new world of fancy goods stores, fashionable mantua-makers and enticing dry goods stores.³⁹

³⁹ See Helen M. Morgan ed., *A Season in New York, 1801: Letters of Harriet and Maria Trumbull* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1969), 1-19. A mantua was a loose gown that fitted over the top of stays or corsets. By the end of the 17th century the mantua replaced the bodice and skirts in women's fashions. The mantua-maker was usually female but women were not permitted by guild law to make the stays. This task was performed by a tailor. See Crowley, *The Invention of Comfort*, 143-44.

The relationship began cordially as little more than an exercise in sociability. “Mrs. Seber [sic] called very soon,” wrote Maria to her parents only two weeks after they had first arrived in New York, “and as we were going to Mrs. Fays to dine, we dressed us and went to walk with her[,] we went to a great many shops to look for bonnets which we really want very much – and saw *some* very pretty ones.”⁴⁰ Eliza Sebor’s first step had been to guide the girls to some of the better or more fashionable shops in the neighborhood. Perhaps Maria’s judgment on the bonnets she had seen was in part due to Mrs. Sebor’s prompting, pushing the young women gently towards what was more tasteful, directing their attention away from what might be considered ugly, old-fashioned or garish.

By January 1801, Mrs. Sebor was more than a friendly guide, she was more of a sponsor and enabler for the two young women. She lent them money to buy white calico gowns and when Maria and Harriet needed a mantua-maker to cut, fit and finish those gowns, they relied on Mrs. Sebor’s recommendation to find the right woman for the job. When both girls began to consider the possibility of purchasing some “persians,” the girls waited for an occasion when Mrs. Sebor could accompany them.⁴¹ Finally, when it came time for the sisters to do some shopping for their families – like Eliza Southgate Bowne – Harriet wrote to her mother to reassure her that her “Brother advised [them] not to go out shopping alone, as [they] should be so liable to be cheated, but Mrs. Sebor ha[d] been so good as to offer to go out with [them] at any time.”⁴²

⁴⁰ Maria Trumbull to Governor and Mrs. Trumbull, Dec. 17, 1800, *A Season in New York, 1801*, 68.

⁴¹ Persians were a thin plain silk principally used for making gowns, petticoats and coat linings. Named for the most highly prized silks, which came out of Persia, the fabric was more likely to have been an English imitation of this expensive material. See Montgomery, *Textiles in America*, 321.

⁴² On the loan from Mrs. Sebor see, Harriet Trumbull to Governor Trumbull, Jan. 10, 1801, On the recommendation for the mantua-maker see, Harriet Trumbull to Mrs. Trumbull, Jan. 18, 1801, on the

In this way, Mrs. Sebor acted as far more than a sociable shopping partner. She protected the girls from the vagaries of the marketplace, prevented them from being cheated, helped them find the best goods and better services as well as teaching the sisters how to navigate their way through the growing urban maze of shops and businesses which had sprung up in New York along Hanover Square, Broad Street, Queen Street and William Street. In 1790, Hanover Square alone had over forty shops crowded into its precincts, ranging from book shops and stationery stores to perfume stores and apothecaries' shops, and squeezed along side these were milliners, toy stores and even one artificial florist shop.⁴³ For two young women from Lebanon, Connecticut the bustle of customers, the heady wafts of scent from perfume stores and druggists and the calls of street hawkers, hucksters and oyster sellers would have been at once scintillating and intimidating.⁴⁴ Without some sort of guide, newcomers to the city would quickly be overwhelmed. It was thanks to Eliza Sebor's careful guidance that the two sisters learnt how to shop in this rapidly expanding metropole and their letters home testify to their friend's success. By the end of the season they were fully equipped with velvet bonnets, fashionable calico gowns in white and dark blue as well as a plethora of other items including hats, sugar plums, delightful trinkets and even some chinaware for the family and a new wig for their mother. But Mrs. Sebor's was more than a guide. Her experience also dictated what kinds of choices the two young women could make. Beyond simply introducing them to merchants and making sure they got a good price for their purchases,

persians see, Harriet Trumbull to Mrs. Trumbull, Feb. 11, 1801, and on the need for Mrs. Sebor's presence see, Harriet Trumbull to Mrs. Trumbull, Apr. 24, 1801 in *A Season in New York*, 88, 99, 117, 170.

⁴³ Thomas David Beal, "Selling Gotham: The Retail Trade in New York City From the Public Market to Alexander T. Stewart's Marble Palace, 1625-1860," (Ph.D. Diss., State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1998), 273-276.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 277. See also Charles H. Haswell, *Reminiscences of New York by an Octogenarian* (New York: Harper, 1896), 35.

it was probably her preferences, taste and judgment that dictated what the sisters began to covet and calculate on getting in this new world of goods.

It was out of these kinds of personal relationships, as well as mediated and often limited access to the marketplace as a result of debt, dependency or sheer distance, that a very specific understanding of consumer choice emerged. The decision to buy a good that was tasteful and appropriate was less an exercise in personal preference or economic self confidence and more an expression of a person's family situation or social position. Indeed, despite Harmon Wendell's invocation of the "self" even he relied on a web of relations and acquaintances that complicated any claims he made to liberal selfhood as an individual consumer. Instead he was a man firmly embedded within social and familial networks and whose identity as expressed through the marketplace was more indebted to an interdependent collaboration than any autonomous expression of personal identity. This was only reinforced by the fact that understandings of taste were formulated through exactly the same kind of collaborative, interdependent processes.

In attempting to judge what was fashionable or "up to the minute," most American shoppers had to rely on news and information passed along by somebody else. Usually unable to see new trends for themselves, shoppers relied on their friends and relatives to provide accurate descriptions of the goods and styles that would help them cultivate an elegant appearance.⁴⁵ Of course, this also meant that individuals had to be well versed in a language of material goods, able to differentiate fabrics with ease and understand how clothes were constructed, if short hand descriptions of outfits were to be translated into shopping lists. Eliza Southgate Bowne for example, was vastly impressed

⁴⁵ Amy H. Henderson, "'She rambles through the town': Shopping and Self-Fashioning in Federal Philadelphia," A paper presented to the McNeil Center for Early American Studies Seminar Series, McNeil Center, Philadelphia, Apr. 27, 2007. Cited with the author's permission.

by the elegant Mrs. Westolo, whom she encountered at a trip to the fashionable spa town of Balston. “She really is beautiful,” gushed Eliza to her friend Eleanor Coffin in August 1802. [She is] “dressed very plain; cotton cambric morning gown, white sarsnet cloak, hair plain and black veil thrown carelessly over her head.” Clearly, Eliza’s letter passed on valuable information to Eleanor Coffin. Knowing what the cream of New York society were wearing in Balston was coveted knowledge, and Eleanor may have planned her purchases accordingly. But she might also have envied her friend, Eliza, who probably thanks to the careful guidance of her friend and patron at Balston that summer – Mrs. Derby – had already purchased a gown in the fashionable sarsnet and was told by her mentor to wear it the next day, as they were scheduled to “drink tea with the mayor.”⁴⁶

In this way Bowne took on the responsibility of passing on information on styles and dress. She approached this task with an accomplished practicality, referring to it as “business” in her own letters to her family. Her knowledge of fabrics and styles made her an excellent source of information for the other members of her family who struggled to make their purchases seem as current as possible. “The gown patterns I shall enclose,” wrote Eliza to her sister Octavia,

The one with a fan back is meant to just meet before and pin the Robings, no string belt or anything. The other pattern in a plain waist with strips of the same sticked on, and for white, laced between with a bobbin or cord. I have a muslin done so with black silk cord, which looks handsome – and I have altered my brown silk into one like the other pattern. I was over at Saco yesterday and saw one Mary [King] had made in Boston. It was a separate waist, or rather the breadths did not go quite up. The waist was plain with one stripe of cording let in behind and the rest of the waist perfectly plain.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Bowne, *A Girl's Life Eighty Years Ago*, 132-136. Mrs. Derby, was Mrs. Hasket Derby, daughter-in-law of the wealthy Elias Hasket Derby of Salem, Mass. Sarsanet (also spelt sarsnet) was a thin transparent silk of plain weave, which was used as fine dress material. See Montgomery, *Textiles in America*, 339.

⁴⁷ Bowne, *A Girl's Life Eighty Years Ago*, 19-20.

For Octavia, this detailed litany of items would have helped her plan what she wanted to buy when the time came; almost certainly silk cording would be on the list.

As these collective experiences suggest, the practice of consuming durable and semi-durable goods in the early republic did not help fashion an individual identity or personal expression of taste and fashion, as much as it reinforced Americans' understanding of consumption as a highly collaborative and interdependent process. Thus, as Americans began to make sense of how consumption would shape the nation's political economy, these notions of duty and obligation deeply shaped their understandings of how they, as consumers, could relate to the nation. They would not have been able to imagine a world where they could consume simply to please themselves. Instead, their experiences would have shaped a set of expectations whereby modifying personal choice in consumption was simply one of many obligations an individual would submit to for community and country.

In looking for guidance on how best to spend their money, many Americans did not look to the intellectual musings of Adam Smith but instead took a more practical approach, seeking out works on political economy that spoke to the more immediate concerns of domestic life, personal consumption and balancing fashion with prudence. Examining the highly popular and successful works that emerged in the early 1800s that dealt with consumption in a more domestic setting, but that still spoke to national concerns, is a means of understanding just how Americans began to make sense of their habits as consumers within the new nation. Significantly, many of these works were addressed to young women and mothers. In part this was a practical decision. Many young women,

recently married, found themselves in charge of the household accounts, and even though their husbands would have the final say in their expenditures, women wanted to know how best to spend their family income. But there was a further reason for the focus on female spending. In the unsteady economy of the 1790s, money began to take new precedence as the index of economic value and a growing emphasis on wage earning as the measure of labor's worth acted to obscure the unpaid work women did to sustain the household. In particular, the contemporary understanding of the urban household economy in the early nineteenth century placed women in the non-productive category, a belief which generated particular anxiety about female spending.⁴⁸

The conviction that women were less productive in the early 1800s had a basis in observation, although the conclusions were faulty. It was certainly the case that as members of urban households, women were less obviously engaged in the production of food. Without easy access to land, women bought their eggs, chickens and vegetables rather than raising the produce themselves, as their rural counterparts continued to do. Urban households could also be rich and wealth alleviated some of the burdens of running a household, since servants could undertake some of the heavier chores. Moreover, in the wake of the Revolution, educated men and women began to emphasize that women's first responsibility in the new nation was to teach children republican habits and values. This attention to child-rearing contributed to the idea that women did not do economically productive work. All of these assumptions and opinions overlooked the daily labor that lower and middle-class women undertook in producing saleable goods for the household, cleaning, mending, baking, cooking, washing clothes and raising children.

⁴⁸ Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

Even if urban women were engaged in different tasks from rural women, they still labored within the household. Regardless, Americans in the early republic began to imagine wealthier urban women as spenders not producers.⁴⁹ In an environment where Americans of all kinds worried about independence, both on an individual level and a national one, the idea that women could spend more than men could earn, or indeed more than the nation could produce, was worrying indeed. Thus it should come as no surprise that women's consumption in particular generated specific anxiety.

Perhaps this was the reason that Jane Haldimand Marcet published a text book on political economy for young adults in 1816. Jane Haldimand, although born in Geneva, had been raised in England. She married a Geneva-born chemist, Alexandre Marcet in 1799, who had moved to Edinburgh six years earlier to study medicine. This particular background allowed Jane Marcet to move in rarefied intellectual circles. Her husband was friendly with the Scottish moral philosopher, Dugald Stuart, and Jane Marcet soon found herself immersed in the cultures of the French and Scottish scientific enlightenment. In 1806, she published a text book on chemistry which was extremely successful in America. Ten years later she published a similar work on the subject of political economy, a book which garnered her less notice but still earned her a place as a "contemporary female genius."⁵⁰ Marcet's text was deliberately intended for young people, even though as she noted in the preface of her work, this was not a subject that

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* See also Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York 1789-1860*, 3rd ed., (1982; repr., Urbana and Chicago: Illini, 1987); on republican motherhood the classic work is Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); on rural women and household production see Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Knopf, 1990).

⁵⁰ On Marcet's background see Saba Bahar, "Jane Marcet and the Limits to Public Science," *The British Journal for the History of Science*, 34 (Mar. 2001): 30-32. On Marcet's reputation in America see "Contemporary Female Genius," *The Ladies' Literary Cabinet, Being a Repository of Miscellaneous Literary Productions, both Original and Selected in Prose and Verse*, 4 (Aug. 25, 1821): 125.

younger audiences professed much interest in. In fact, as her inquisitive protagonist,

Caroline, notes in conversation with her instructor, Mrs. B:

[political economy] appears to me the most uninteresting of all subjects. It is all about custom-houses, and trade, and taxes, and bounties, and smuggling, and paper money, and the bullion committee, &c. which I can not hear named without yawning. Then there is... Adam Smith, whose name is never uttered without...a respectful almost religious veneration...but...I was so overwhelmed by a jargon of unintelligible terms...I threw the book away in despair.⁵¹

Through Mrs. B., Marcet endeavored to demonstrate that the science of political economy was not only easier to understand than young men and especially young women might have been led to believe, but that ultimately it revealed the ways in which consumers' individual actions had a part to play in strengthening their nation's economic power and moral standing.

Marcet's discussion of consumption, like Smith's, was in many ways a balancing act. The challenge was to walk the tightrope between the two extremes of reckless spending and penny pinching, both excessive forms of behavior associated with consumption, and both attitudes that could materially and morally damage the economic health and moral standards of a community. From the outset, Marcet made it clear that how individuals chose to consume depended on their class status. She did not think it was necessary to teach political economy to the poor, only to teach them that they should be "industrious, frugal and provident."⁵² Although she was willing to concede that the poor could enjoy aspirations to wealth and that this in itself was a good thing for the economy, since it inspired the poor to work harder, her discussions of consumption were oriented

⁵¹ Jane Haldimand Marcet, *Conversations on Political Economy in which the Elements of that Science are Familiarly Explained* (Philadelphia: Moses Thomas, 1817), 5.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 133.

around the wealthy.⁵³ With this implicit understanding in place, Marcet first turned her attention to the attendant problems of reckless spending, picking up the threads of the old debate over the place and character of luxury.

The first crucial distinction she made was that capital could be consumed in one of two ways: either it could be consumed productively or it could be destroyed.

Productive consumption was essentially investment: money used to buy productive assets, such as a barn or cattle used for farming or employed in purchasing commodities that would raise further capital through sale, such as crops or livestock for market.⁵⁴

Destructive consumption on the other hand, was the frittering away of capital on items that would never see any return. Marcet included in this category everything from a fireworks display (literally, money going up in smoke) to “magnificent apparel [and] splendid equipages.”⁵⁵ Through the questions of “the student, Caroline” she explained why buying these items was a destruction of capital. Even though they helped to pay the salaries of craftsmen, the payment represented a dead end. Once the money had been spent on “the gratification of [the consumer’s] desires” it could no longer be put to productive use. Marcet did not address the question of whether the artisan could put his new found capital to work for him, she simply argued that eventually this usage would undermine the artisan, whose sources of employment would dry up as wealthy men ran out of money. For Marcet, the central point was that “the spending of capital is a sterile consumption of it, whilst its employment is a reproductive consumption.”⁵⁶

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 373.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 86-89, 361.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 362.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

The consequences of extravagance, as Marcet explained it, seemed to echo older descriptions that sketched out the folly of luxury. She took care to focus on the moral and material decay that accompanied excessive spending, highlighting the plight of the homeless poor, who wandered without subsistence when the capital that would have furnished them with wages was wasted on fripperies instead. But Marcet's account also reflected the eighteenth century reaction against the prohibition of worldly happiness. Her refutation of luxury was not grounded in a deeply rooted antipathy toward luxury as signs of spiritual or civic vice. Rather, her argument was based solely on her explanations of how an economy worked as a system. Drawing on a language that invoked the image of a delicately calibrated mechanism, Marcet revealed that the problem with luxury was that it was an excess of spending in one area, thus disrupting the equilibrium of the marketplace. Once again drawing on Smith, Marcet presented a new naturalized vision of the market, which connected the actions of each individual to the interests of others and thus became an organic whole, where capital could ebb and flow along its natural courses, nourishing everyone along the way.⁵⁷

This vision of the marketplace provided the rationale for Marcet's observation that the naturally balanced workings of the market were often "in a great measure subverted by the folly and ignorance of man. An injudicious interference of government for instance, may give peculiar advantages to the employment of capital in one particular branch of industry, to the prejudice of others, and thus destroy that natural and distribution of [capital] which is so essential to the prosperity of the community."⁵⁸ Through statements such as this, Marcet made it clear that she followed Adam Smith's

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 364.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

understanding of the economy and that any kind of interference – including the use of sumptuary laws or deliberate attempts to curb consumption through tariffs – would disrupt the ways in which individuals naturally generated wealth by striving for their desires and following their own self-interest. The aspirations of men to own the various comforts and conveniences of life inspired both industry and accumulation, both of which stimulated the economy by providing employment for merchants, manufacturers, farmers and laborers. To enact sumptuary laws would “generally, tend to depress the efforts of industry,” argued Marcet. “The desire of increasing our enjoyments, and of improving our situation in life...is one of the strongest sentiments implanted in our nature... [and] essentially conducive to the general welfare.”⁵⁹ In this way, Marcet found a place for luxury consumption in a modern economy. It stimulated production, which in turn advanced civilization. Provided individuals spent their money in balance with their means, refrained from excess and practiced an economy of relativity, the introduction of luxury goods into an economy could be a healthy boon to any nation.

The lesson to be drawn from Marcet’s text was that each individual should follow their natural desires. Yet even as this message took shape, Marcet was also dealing with the question of how each person could be expected to learn the limits of their natural desires. Although she never confronted the paradox that natural self-interest would have to be taught as a form of behavior if individuals were to uphold the practices of economy and industry, she did make a sly nod to this issue by confronting the very nature of political economy at the start of her text book. Through the perennially wise voice of Mrs. B., Marcet related an anecdote that connected the teachings of political economy to the heart of the domestic sphere: “I once heard a lady ask a philosopher,” said ‘Mrs. B.,’

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 370.

“to explain to her in a few words what is meant by political economy. Madam, replied he, you understand perfectly what is meant by *household economy*; you need only to extend your idea of the economy of a family to that of a whole people – of a nation, and you will have some comprehension of the nature of political economy.”⁶⁰ In this deft way, Marcet made political economy relevant to every young woman who read her book by making it implicitly clear that the ways in which a wife or mother attended to the business of her home, had a bearing on the business of the nation: they were after all, the same thing.⁶¹

In fact, many Americans were already aware of the link between personal wealth and political status and believed it to be more than simple metaphor. “WEALTH places a man in a state which all must covet, a state of INDEPENDENCE,” wrote Benjamin Franklin, in one of the many re-printings of his bestseller, *The Way to Wealth*. “To owe no man any thing to be able to go whithersoever we please: and to face any company without dread of dunning is a luxury too divine to be *conceived* by any who have not been haunted and hag ridden by creditors.”⁶² In Franklin’s telling, wealth ensured financial independence and freedom from the fear of creditors. But in a moment when outstanding debt could lead to imprisonment as well as the stigma of moral failure, financial autonomy also translated into civic standing and political right to make

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶¹ The rising interest in domestic economy and etiquette literature at the start of the nineteenth century has been noted by John Kasson and Karen Halttunen amongst others. However, few have connected this phenomenon with the growing interest in the genre of political economy in America, which is documented by Esther Lowenthal’s analysis of American re-printings of English and French works in this genre. See Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); John F. Kasson, *Rudeness & Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990) and Lowenthal, ‘American Reprints of Economic Writings, 1776-1848.’

⁶² Benjamin Franklin, *The Way to Wealth* (Montpelier, VT: Printed for Josiah Parks at the Press of Walton & Gross, 1810), 6. “Dunning” indicated the process by which creditors continued to remind their debtors of amounts still owed to them on a specific account. For more on the incredible persistence and popularity of Franklin’s *The Way to Wealth* which was first published in 1758, see James Green and Peter Stallybrass, *Benjamin Franklin: Writer and Printer* (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 2006).

independent choices. Franklin made this connection explicit as he advocated for frugality from his readers:

[A] free American ought not to be ashamed to see or speak to any man living. But poverty often deprives a man of spirit and virtue. 'It is hard for an empty bag to stand up right.' What would you think of that nation or of that government, who should issue an edict, forbidding you to dress like a gentleman or gentlewoman on pain of imprisonment or servitude? Would you not say that you were free, have a right to dress as you please, and that such an edict would be a breach of your privileges, and such a government tyrannical? And yet you are about to put yourself under that tyranny when you run into debt for such dress! Your creditors has authority...to deprive you of your liberty.⁶³

Franklin's message was quite clear, debt led to oppression and dependence, and as such an indebted man could not be a citizen in a republic.

Franklin's words may have been unequivocal, but the truth was that the situation was beginning to change by the turn of the nineteenth century. In 1800, Congress had enacted a Bankruptcy Law, which provided a "framework within which commercial debtors and creditors could cooperate in sorting through the fallout of failure."⁶⁴

Although the law only applied to those who owed more than \$1,000, the implications of the new legislation were such that a new attitude toward debt began to emerge.

Insolvency became associated with economic risk, a chance that any man might have to take in an increasingly speculative marketplace. As Americans began to accept that risk was an inherent part of doing business, the belief that debt was somehow an indication of moral weakness ebbed away. Particularly when debt was a result of commercial dealings, blame was shifted away from individual morality and attached instead to the amorphous "hazards of the marketplace."⁶⁵ While the Act itself was contested by the larger group of

⁶³ Franklin, *The Way to Wealth*, 23.

⁶⁴ Bruce H. Mann, *The Republic of Debtors. Bankruptcy in the Age of American Independence* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 254.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 256.

small merchants, artisans and craftsmen who did not benefit from this Federalist law which protected a cadre of elite merchants and bankers, it was simply the impunity of the rich that was debated, not the idea that debtors should be penalized for commercial failures by a loss of liberty and civic virtue. Thus, even as Franklin's words remained a part of the advice that many young Americans would read and imbibe, the costs of running up debt was beginning to change, since it no longer always entailed such a radical loss of legal and civic standing.

Despite these changes in attitudes towards debt, most authors of domestic economy manuals found themselves, like Marcet, walking a thin line between the extremes of excess and parsimony. These books, most often aimed at young women who were setting up their homes for the first time, did not preach pure self-denial. Maria Rundell's popular tome, *A New System of Domestic Cookery*, which between 1807 and 1808 had run through at least three American editions, contained instructions on how to clean floorcloths, carpets, paperhangings, looking glasses, gilding, mahogany, marble and plate. These were not items one would expect to find in a home where the purchase of any goods was prohibited.⁶⁶ However, excess was routinely disparaged in the pages of these works. The challenge for these instructors was to promote "the happy medium between prodigality and parsimony, without acquiring the character of meanness."⁶⁷ This practice was not universal advice, although it might have been framed as such. Like Marcet, the authors of these manuals were addressing themselves to families of some wealth. Indeed, their purpose was to instruct those who had money on how best to spend it. Unlike Marcet, however, these authors were not interested in providing insight into the

⁶⁶ Maria Elizabeth Ketelby Rundell, *A New System of Domestic Cookery: Formed Upon Principles of Economy and Adapted to the Use of Private Families by a Lady* (Exeter: Norris and Sayer, 1808).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

mechanisms of the marketplace. Instead they hoped to give specific instruction on what constituted luxury and how best to avoid it.

The definitions of luxury that these advice manuals offered reflected the ambivalent attitudes towards the place of luxury goods in eighteenth century life. Rather than define luxury as a specific set of things, these authors chose to characterize luxury as a relative phenomenon. Buying the goods that made you live beyond your means was in essence a form of luxurious spending. Rundell herself, provided an explanation in her preface, claiming that her work would help the young housekeeper avoid “excessive luxury.” It is telling that she felt the need to modify luxury with the word “excessive.” It was indicative of the fact that luxury as a term on its own no longer connoted immoderation. Rundell’s answer was to give specific examples of what she believed to be excessive, listing certain ingredients –such as the mysterious “essence of ham” – and certain practices as unnecessary for the housekeeper on a budget, but it was hardly the filthy lucre that luxury had signified only decades previously. In fact, as the material meanings of luxury became unmoored, writers fell back on the understanding that luxury was best identified as a disorder, triggered by self-indulgence and most often manifested in physical symptoms. Noah Webster, author of the famous *American Dictionary*, defined “luxurious” in 1806 as a synonym for “voluptuous, softening by pleasure,” and “luxury” itself as an “excess in eating, dress or pleasure.”⁶⁸ As connections were drawn between luxury and ill health, self-indulgence and vice, it was often the dyspeptic, over-indulged, weak or broken down body that signaled a passion for luxury.⁶⁹ Individuals could judge

⁶⁸ Noah Webster, *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language* (New Haven: From Sidney’s Press, for Hudson & Goodwin, Book-sellers, Hartford and Increase Cooke & Co., Book-sellers, 1806), 181.

⁶⁹ Lewis Cornaro, Dr. Franklin and Dr. Scott, *The Immortal Mentor or Man’s Unerring Guide To A Healthy, Wealthy & Happy Life. In Three Parts* (Trenton: Daniel Fenton, 1810), 93.

their own spending by taking stock of their personal health. Luxurious husbands were lazy and incapable, luxurious wives were expensive to maintain and may not be strong enough to bear or care for children. As the effects of luxury translated into the body, the ramifications of consumption became ever more important to the individual, to the household and the nation's health.

Given the importance of avoiding excessive luxury, especially for women who had the responsibility of running the household, the advice that these texts offered was of an intensely practical nature. Among the many instructions that Anne MacVicar Grant, author of *Sketches of Intellectual Education and Hints in Domestic Economy*, offered her readers was a simple suggestion to keep track of what you spend. "Inattention to practical arithmetic and false hopes of parental affluence, have plunged many into embarrassments which correct information might have prevented," she wrote. "Young persons might be desired to sum up the exact amount of their father's income and after deducting the general family's expenses, let the remainder be apportioned to each individual, calculating how much may be allowed for personal necessities."⁷⁰ This was the same advice Maria Rundell had offered and no doubt others like her. While educational text books that explained the basic principles of arithmetic remained geared towards boys, it is clear that some young women learnt the skill of keeping accounts and used the technique to keep track of their purchases. Catherine Van Schaak, a young woman at school in Kinderhook, NY and later Litchfield, CT, kept a meticulous account of her incomings and outgoings throughout her time away from home. She noted her annual income of \$60-00 per annum in rents which she spent on her education - \$2 a quarter - as

⁷⁰ Anne MacVicar Grant, *Sketches of Intellectual Education and Hints on Domestic Economy, Addressed to Mothers, with an Appendix containing an Essay on the Instruction of the Poor* (Baltimore: Edward J. Coale, 1813), 209.

well as everything from a quire of paper to the lining of her hat. It seemed that her accounting stood her in good stead. Despite her \$60.00 income she spent only \$40.56 ½ in her first year of school. By staying in budget she had remained a good consumer even as she spent her money on personal indulgences such as trips to Balston and calico dresses.⁷¹

Other advice offered by the manuals focused more on the process of shopping itself. The authors counseled shoppers to remain well informed as to price and quality; to shop around but stick largely to stores they knew and choose what to buy only after undertaking a careful and rational decision making process. They urged women not to buy bargains simply because they seemed cheap but to buy what was of good value, a quality that came in part from choosing an item that was needed and not only wanted. Carefully conserving household items rather than replacing them was encouraged. These values did not simply ensure good economy within a household, but ultimately better management of a nation. Lecturing on the need for young women to mend clothes and furniture rather than buy new, Anne Grant pointed out that the example young women set had a huge influence on their brothers or even sons. “The sums squandered, or rather mouldered away by individual negligence perhaps exceed the interest of our national debt,” wrote Grant. “...if we endeavour to reckon how many things are perishing by carelessness...[h]ow much ground unproductive or ill improved...with the vast extent of waste lands in our empire would amount to an immense revenue.”⁷²

Eliza Southgate Bowne certainly believed her mother was trying to teach her the habits of frugality. “I believe, my dear Mother,” she wrote in July 1800, “that you meant

⁷¹ Catherine Van Schaak, 1802-1803, *Account Book*, N-YHS.

⁷² Rundell, *A New System of Domestic Cookery*, 2-5; Grant, *Sketches of Intellectual Education*, 180.

to give me a very close lesson in Economy – when you cut out the shirts for me to make. You had measured off the bodies of two and cut them part way in – and also the sleeves were marked, - after I had cut them off there was a quarter of a yard left.”⁷³ The careful use of fabrics to make and remake items of clothing was one way in which young women in particular could remain stylish but practice the habits of economy. Other women spent time looking for bargains by tirelessly trawling the shops for muslins and silks. Even though these activities had a sociable component, going to two or three shops to discover the price and quality of five yards of figured muslin entailed a great deal of effort in an already busy life.⁷⁴

These domestic manuals not only counseled against luxury spending but also pointed to a way in which consumer debt would damage personal standing and communal ties. The advice manuals instructed consumers to pay the bills promptly and not allow themselves to purchase on long lines of credit wherever possible. There were two good reasons for this. The first was that making people wait for their money injured the wider community. By withholding payment, an individual could inflict their debt on not only the retailer they owed, but also on the retailer’s creditors, creating a spiraling chain of debt to constrict society. But more practically, using long lines of credit meant the unnecessary payment of higher prices for goods.⁷⁵ In order to make lines of credit worth their while, shopkeepers often charged customers who bought on extended credit significantly higher prices, and payments could rise as interest accrued. Prompt payment,

⁷³ Bowne, *A Girl's Life Eighty Years Ago*, 26.

⁷⁴ Elizabeth Drinker, *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, ed., Elaine Foreman Crane, (Boston, MA: Northeastern University, 1991), 2:1284.

⁷⁵ Rundell, *A New System of Domestic Cookery*, 2-5.

kept household costs low and was much appreciated shopkeepers who otherwise had to make constant assessments of their customers means when offering credit.

Even so, the marketplace was awash with various kinds of specie and notes of credit and navigating payment required skill and a careful accounting of what bills had been paid and when.⁷⁶ Perhaps this is why Mary Malyar Gulager, a divorced woman, boarding in Philadelphia in 1813, kept an account book in which she asked her creditors to record every payment she made to them. This book of receipts is notable because it was not a personal account book but rather a written testament that Gulager had paid what she owed. Each receipt was written out and signed by the creditor, an incontrovertible record of debts paid. Perhaps Gulager could not write herself and felt vulnerable, as a single woman, without some kind of written record to support her word. In a moment when consumer transactions were not brief exchanges of money, but rather long term relationships, where payment was made after three or six months, this book hints at the ways in which consumption could not only knit people into a larger community of debt, obligation and temporary dependence but also that these relationships could become contentious and fracture communal ties. Gulager's book was an insurance policy as much as a means to keep track of her money.⁷⁷

Tying all these instructions together was a broad injunction to curb desire and prevent self-indulgence, in yourself and especially in your children. Teaching young people that gratification did not come through material things was perhaps the first thing that parents in particular had to focus on. "Toys, sweetmeats and trinkets, ought not to be

⁷⁶ On the confusing nature of currency in the early republic see Stephen Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters. Con Men and the Making of the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 25-52.

⁷⁷ Mary Malyar Gulager, *Receipt Book, 1813-1835*, Gulager Family Collection, HSP. On the long terms relationships between consumers and retailers see also John Valentine, *Account Book, 1807-1817*, N-YHS.

given as tokens of approbation,” wrote Anne Grant. “They should not be mentioned, but as things of course, and in such a manner as to evince the insignificance of such trifles.”⁷⁸ If training began as an infant it only became more strict as the child got older. “Gaudy toys” were frowned upon, as was “a passion for glittering show, and all animal indulgencies.”⁷⁹ Women in particular were encouraged to curb any instinctual pleasure they might have found in the acquisition of new material goods. How “often does the foolish virgin or infatuated matron, sell her peace or honour for a ring or a scarf!” lamented a small fashion manual.⁸⁰ Engaging in a world of consumer goods was acceptable, indulging in it was not.

As a result of these principles, wealthy white American families in the early republic expected each other to engage in a very specific way with the world of goods around them. Good consumption was consumption that was not marked as extravagant, excessive, self-indulgent and indicative of poor character. Moreover, it had to satisfy a number of different criteria that were all relative to financial standing, social status, the performance of a considered and rational consumption as well as a comparative aspect which enabled individuals to justify their purchases by looking to the purchases of others. Maria Trumbull, the Connecticut teenager had only been in New York for two months when she wrote to her father with an account of her spending but she had already learnt the rhetoric of comparative consumption, as well as having mastered the art of twisting her father around her little finger. Writing in January 1801, she wheedled:

I have left the Journal for this week to Harriet and am going to give you an account of my expences [sic] - since I have been here – it is just two months

⁷⁸ Grant, *Sketches of Intellectual Education*, 121.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁸⁰ *The Mirror of Graces or, the English Lady's Costume... by a Lady of Distinction*, (New York: I. Riley, 1813), 61.

today, and I declare it frightens me to think how fast the *time* and *money* have run away – and yet looking over the accounts I dont [sic] think I have been extravagant but money does go strangely...Papa I hope you will think I have been quite *prudent* considering what an *extravagant* girl I am. I dont [sic] believe *Weltha Morgans* account would show to much better advantage – her Papa when he was in town got her a pair of pearl earrings that cost 28 dollars! – and I must confess I think it was a very foolish piece of extravagance. I would not thank *my Papa* for such a present.⁸¹

Sadly, Jonathan Trumbull's answer is lost. Perhaps Maria persuaded him however that her account book, which listed items including sugar plums, trinkets and hairdressing costs, were in fact purchases that were both prudent and acceptable through her brazen allusions to Weltha Morgan's self-indulgent spending. Virtuous consumption, an act that had a bearing on the strength of the nation, was not achieved by following a set of pre-determined rules. Instead it was, as most things are, a question of context and negotiation.

When domestic advice books did not suffice, Americans drew lessons from making a broader comparison with the shopping habits of the consumers of Great Britain. As Americans began to distance themselves from the English in the wake of the Revolution, the cultural representations of British shoppers began to symbolize the essence of the luxurious self-indulgent individual and, to some, encapsulated the antithesis of the healthy republican citizen. The antipathy toward British goods was not simply cultural. There were good economic reasons not to buy British goods. They channeled precious specie out of America and boosted British manufacturing, thus strengthening the economy of their old enemy while sapping the energy from America's own fragile economy. These arguments became more heated as the Napoleonic Wars put new pressure on American trade and prompted new commercial restrictions. But even before relations with Britain deteriorated, many Americans still purchased British goods

⁸¹ Maria Trumbull to General Trumbull, *A Season in New York*, 106.

and looked to Britain for guidance in what was fashionable. Thus, while Americans did criticize the British for what they bought, they chose to distinguish themselves as Americans by focusing their attention on the culture of shopping, as a means of separating republican habits of consumption from the corrupt practices of the British. Ironically the Americans often used critiques of indolence that the British had written themselves. Re-printing the satires of British shoppers and style watchers, Americans mocked the ultra fashionable commercial world that the British themselves found alarming.

One figure that attracted a great deal of anxiety and disdain was the male dandy. While the critiques of the excessively fashionable and self-indulgent male were largely focused on the effeminate nature of men who were overly concerned with matters of dress, the moniker that these dandies earned tied them to a broader discourse over national identity and consumption. Commonly referred to as the “Bond-Street Lounger,” these dandies represented the corrupt facet of consumer culture in Great Britain.⁸² These men idled away their days, strolling up and down the fashionable precincts of London’s Bond Street, buying expensive fripperies on credit, gorging themselves on delectable pastries and ice cream and watching, sometimes libidinally, everyone else. Many things about the “Bond Street Lounger” worried Americans. The obsession with external appearance, the expensive purchases and resulting debt made “the Lounger” a weak, dependent figure, the antithesis of American masculinity. He was unattached to family or society and pleased only himself, placing him outside the networks that a virtuous

⁸² See for example, “Festoon of Fashion” *The Port-Folio*, Feb. 20, 1802; “Festoon of Fashion” *The Port-Folio*, Aug. 28, 1802; Misogymnatas, “Levity” *The Port-Folio*, Dec. 1, 1804; A Man of Fashion, “Parody of Gray’s Ode on the Spring,” *Weekly Visitor, or Ladies Miscellany*, May 17, 1806; *The Village songster containing a selection of the most approved patriotic and comic songs*. (Haverhill, Mass: Burill and Tileston, 1817), 41.

consumer operated within. He was sensual and self-indulgent, wallowing in luxury and unable to *do* anything, other than browse and shop. This effeminate behavior made the “Bond Street Lounger” a figure who was gleefully derided in American culture, in novels, comic songs and magazine articles. Inherently tied to London’s best known shopping street, the figure of the “Bond Street Lounger” allowed Americans to satirize British shopping culture and model American consumption as the antithesis of this archetype simply by expressing their disdain. But Americans did not find it easy to negotiate a relationship with the fashions of Europe. The same satires that Americans printed to mock European and particularly British fashionable life, were the same texts that could provide young men and women with information on what exactly was stylish that season. Thus, the focus on the *practice* of shopping, rather than the goods purchased, was one way to diffuse the anxieties that surrounded the possession of European manufactured goods, but it was not always successful.

Perhaps the biggest problem was that urban retail districts in America were beginning to change and as a result, Americans found that the practice of shopping was changing with it. Any American who had visited an urban center, but especially New York, by the 1800s would have been familiar with the concept of a retail district. From the 1750s onwards, shopkeepers supplanted the merchants and wholesalers as the retailers of imported goods. As a result new shopping districts began to emerge out of the interstices of older urban configurations. Dry goods stores, druggists and the purveyors of cheap household goods in New York surrounded the city’s marketplaces. The New Oswego Market, the Fly Market and the Coenties Market, all attracted a great deal of foot traffic and shopkeepers aimed to take advantage of that fact. The retailers growing

success resulted in these shopping districts moving away from the wharves of the waterfront and the marketplaces in the 1790s and into the center of the city where they had space to expand into bustling retail centers.⁸³ Thus, by the 1810s, New Yorkers could find cheap retail dry goods stores in upper Pearl and Chatham Street.⁸⁴ Fine specialty shops lined lower Broadway and clustered around William Street, Hanover Square, Smith Street and Maiden Lane, taking advantage of the newer and wider sidewalks that accommodated foot-passage.⁸⁵ In Philadelphia, the retail stores also stood just back from the waterfront, clustered along Second Street between Arch and Chesnut. Between Second and Third on Race Street, several retail dry goods stores flourished, milliners could be found on Arch Street and shoe stores were scattered along High Street. As in New York, Philadelphia merchants, wholesalers and grocers remained near the wharves, spreading out along Front Street and Water Street.⁸⁶

These retail districts did not simply concentrate the shopping experience; they altered its very nature. As shopkeepers jostled for space and the attention of their customers in the urban landscape, they began to look for new ways to entice their customers inside their stores. Although the bulging bow window, long associated with the elegant shopping of London, began to be installed in the 1760s, it was not until the 1790s that this expensive improvement became popular in New York, and in Philadelphia these new store fronts were still being remarked on in the 1800s.⁸⁷ These windows allowed shopkeepers to practice the art of alluring display and despite the fact that windows

⁸³ Beal, "Selling Gotham," 243-253.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 455.

⁸⁵ Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham. A History of New York City to 1898*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 340.

⁸⁶ John F. Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania in the Olden Time* (Philadelphia: Leary, Stuart & Co., 1909), 1:226-7.

⁸⁷ Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 340; Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia*, 222.

protruded into the street, often crowding pedestrians off the sidewalk, the innovation introduced the notion of window shopping into American retail culture. Retail display invited the consumer to revel in the variety and beauty of consumer goods and provided a visual treat that tempted the consumer to escape for a moment from the busy world of work or home. “William and self walk’d 14 squars [sic] this evening,” wrote Elizabeth Drinker, the perpetually busy wife and mother of a large Quaker family, in 1800. “[S]top’d to look at the col[er]ed bottles in the Apothecarys shop in third street near Chestnut Street. Peter Widdows was at the door, he asked us in to look at some curious shells &c.”⁸⁸ Even without buying anything, the Drinkers momentarily indulged their desire to delight their senses and gratify their curiosity.

In fact, a whole new customer experience geared towards delighting the senses accompanied these external changes. Describing in retrospect the opening of the first “brilliant fancy dry goods shop with bulk windows...in true Bond street style” one Philadelphia chronicler, John Watson, remembered the “uncommon sized lights in the two bulks, and the fine mull-mull and jaconet muslins, the chintses and linens suspended in whole pieces, from top to bottom and entwined together in puffs and festoons, (totally new) and the shopman, behind the counter, powdered, bowing and smiling.”⁸⁹ Watson went on to complain that the shop had been over perfumed and the style of the clerk was pretentious. But his description suggests that shopping was becoming an entirely new sensory experience. Americans who imagined that they did not shop the same way as the

⁸⁸ Drinker, *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, 2:803. Experiences like this suggest that it is time to reconsider William Leach’s argument that many stores did not make powerful use of retail display before 1889. See William Leach, *Land of Desire. Merchants, Power and the Rise of a New American Culture*, (New York: Pantheon, 1993) 55-57. I take up this argument in Chapter Five.

⁸⁹ Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia*, 222.

corrupt British belles or Bond Street Loungers, soon found their republican image of themselves to be challenged by experience.

Between the changing reality of a consumer landscape and a complicated set of expectations surrounding getting and spending, Americans in the early republic struggled to make sense of what it meant to be consumers in the United States. The Revolution had politicized consumption, making choices and purchases an indication of civic virtue and patriotism. But the question of how the consumer related to the nation remained confused. In the wake of the War of Independence, the experience of consumption contradicted a burgeoning language of rights, autonomy and independence that suggested individuals could navigate the market as independent citizens. While the idea persisted that good consumer choices had a bearing on the nation's economic and political health, few made those choices entirely on their own terms. Despite the prevalence of new works of political economy, like Smith, that placed the self-interested consumer at the center of a strong economy, most Americans continued to experience consumption within a network of responsibility, obligation and mutual interdependence. Consumption as privilege or entitlement, as a facet of American's civic rights, made little sense to citizens in the early republic. However, the expansion of new retail areas and the widening availability of goods in urban shopping areas meant that wealthy Americans could not ignore the conundrum of consumption. Looking to advice books, cultural criticism and above all one another, they hoped that their consumption would reflect their gentility without revealing an engagement with depravity and would uphold their personal independence without compromising their nation's independence in a transatlantic marketplace.

The ability to navigate this precarious path only became more difficult as consumer goods became more available and shopping evolved as a sociable, sensual pleasure in the early republic. Shrill critiques of fashion and luxury were commonplace in magazines, novels and other polemics, only alerting Americans to the fact that the material world represented a constant temptation. But harder times were still to come. In 1806, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison enacted the first of what would become a series of non-importation laws which would eventually add up to the Embargo of Britain and France in 1807. Through the force of punitive tariffs and the monitoring of trade, foreign goods once again became the center of a political maelstrom and Americans began to consider the possibility of a war where once again their habits of consumption would be put to the test. By 1811 it was clear to most Americans that they would soon be fighting the British in what would later be called “the Second War of Independence.” There was no doubt that American liberty and civic pride were under threat. What was not clear, was how this new conflict, which in many ways seemed so familiar to consumers, would change the way in which Americans imagined their rights and obligations as consumers when the war became a reality.

Chapter Two

The Marketplace of Retribution: Commercial Restrictions and the Politics of Consumption, 1806-1815.

On July 7 1812, Philadelphia newspaper readers may have caught a glimpse of a small article entitled “New Fashioned War.” The piece, in *Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser*, described the reaction of the inhabitants of Eastport, Maine to news that war had finally broken out between America and Britain. “The inhabitants of that place, went over to St. Andrews and took *by force* all the British Goods they could find,” ran the report. “Then the British mustered, came over the line and took *by force* all the flour &c. they could find. We are happy to learn no lives were lost.”¹ For residents from far eastern Maine, living on the island-specked Passamaquoddy Bay so close to the Canadian border, their first act of war had been to snatch up all the bales of textiles, bundles of nails and packages of plated ware they could carry back to Moose Island in their boats. It was

¹ “New Fashioned War – Boston July 3rd” *Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), Jul. 7, 1812. For more on this local economy see Joshua M. Smith, *Borderland Smuggling. Patriots, Loyalists, and Illicit Trade in the Northeast, 1783-1820* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 1-17.

hardly a strike designed to bring the British to their knees. Yet the symbolism of the attack was probably not lost on Philadelphian newspaper readers. If they had been reading *Poulson's* for the last six years, they, like their Maine compatriots, would have known that the conflict that had just erupted was just as much a war over woolen hosiery and British hats as it was about "free trade and sailors rights."²

As the weeks progressed and tensions rose, Americans did not forget the importance of British goods. As an editor of an anti-Republican newspaper in Baltimore wrote in the wake of the riots in that city, "a supple adherent of [the] administration in Congress...justified the conduct of the mob, clearly intimating in the same breath that British goods would next fall under the fury of the populace, as witnessed during the war of independence."³ This frightened editor, who had lost both his newspaper and his nerve in the prolonged rioting, knew only too well that this was not an idle threat. Indeed, when a group of Republicans attacked and killed a number of Federalist sympathizers on July 27th they made a point of stripping them of their clothes. John Hall, a Federalist caught by the mob described how "two rough looking men...held [him] by the wrist for about ten minutes...cut off or tore off [his] coat, leaving none of it on [him] but cape and the sleeves. Having thus *secured [his] pockets*, they tore [his] shirt leaving [his] bosom bare."⁴ Hall assumed that the ruffians were after his money but in fact each Federalist

² "Free trade and sailor's rights" was a phrase that was certainly seen as a popular reason for the war. See *Niles' Weekly Register* 7 (Sept., 1814), 14. It is also a view that predominates in the scholarly literature. See for example Anthony S. Pitch, *The Burning of Washington: The British Invasion of 1814* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1998); Reginald Horsman, *The Causes of the War of 1812* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1962). Even the central scholarly bibliography of the war is called "Free Trade and Sailors' Rights" see John C. Fredriksen, *Free Trade and Sailors' Rights: A Bibliography of the War of 1812* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985).

³ "Address of the Editors of the Baltimore Federal Republican" *Spectator* (New York), Aug. 8, 1812. For more on the Baltimore riots see Paul A. Gilje, "The Baltimore Riots of 1812 and the Breakdown of the Anglo-American Mob Tradition," *Journal of Social History* 13 (Summer, 1980): 547-564.

⁴ Quote from Gilje, "The Baltimore Riots," 555.

victim had their clothing stripped from them that night. Their attackers assumed that the clothes were foreign and thus deserved to be destroyed.⁵ Nor did this mob think that they had acted without precedent. As the editor mentioned in his report, they believed their action against British goods to be part of an intrinsically American tradition, a direct echo of the actions taken against British goods in the fight for independence that had taken place forty years earlier.

This echo was no accident. The centrality of British goods to these stories points to the fact that while the Revolution had secured political independence, the question of economic independence was far harder to solve. At the height of the Napoleonic Wars, this realization cut especially deep. Straining but failing to stay out of Britain and France's interminable grudge match only proved to Americans that they had not extricated themselves in any meaningful way from the economic system of the Atlantic World that remained dominated by European imperial might. Indeed, many of the problems they had faced as a colony still plagued them as a newly formed nation. Struggling to assert their national power, Americans fell back on tactics and assumptions that had informed their pre-Revolutionary politics, using a colonial lens to imagine the ways in which they could construct their economic autonomy as a nation.⁶ Republican commercial restrictions between 1806 and 1815 were in many ways an attempt to fashion grassroots non-consumption into a federally administrated campaign of non-importation and embargo.

Yet the strategies of colonial non-consumption were highly problematic in the new national context. In the 1760s, the urgency of securing independence had justified

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ John E. Crowley, *The Privileges of Independence: Neomercantilism and the American Revolution, Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

the temporary tactics of sacrifice.⁷ But by the 1800s, these same practices of self-denial as performances of virtue did not suit an emerging group of merchants, traders and Federalist politicians. These men believed that commercial prosperity was their rightful inheritance as heirs of the Revolution.⁸ Their rejection of non-consumption sat well with the middling and elite ranks of the population, who embraced the benefits of commercial expansion and turned with alacrity to the new material benefits in the early republic. Wealthy Americans, now used to a certain level of material comfort, could no longer do without a wide variety of goods.⁹ Given the underdeveloped state of U.S. manufactures in 1806, this meant that Americans would not agree to isolate themselves from an Atlantic marketplace, as their Revolutionary forebears had temporarily attempted to do with varying degrees of fortitude. Consequently, consumption stood at the very heart of the dilemma that Americans faced when they contemplated the shape of their postcolonial political economy.

As this chapter argues however, the consumer was at first not a subject of political and public discussion. While the subject of consumption came under scrutiny as part of a larger investigation of economic systems, the figure of the consumer as an individual was left shadowy and unclear. Instead, in an effort to construct an economy that supported national interest and commercial prosperity, politicians, political economists and newspaper editors focused their attention on merchants, traders, sailors and smugglers.

⁷ Ann Fairfax Withington, *Toward a More Perfect Union: Virtue and the Formation of the American Republics* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 10-16.

⁸ Cathy D. Matson and Peter S. Onuf, *A Union of Interests. Political and Economic Thought in Revolutionary America* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1990) and Cathy D. Matson "Capitalizing Hope: Economic Thought and the Early National Economy." *Journal of the Early Republic* 16 (Summer, 1996): 273-91.

⁹ John E. Crowley, *The Invention of Comfort: Sensibilities & Design in Early Modern Britain & Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Linzy A. Brekke, "'The 'Scourge of Fashion': Political Economy and the Politics of Consumption in the Early Republic," *Early American Studies* 3 (Spring, 2005): 106-39.

Politicians and public intellectuals believed that these were the citizens that would define the nation's political economy. But between 1806 and 1815, these same politicians, authors and editors came to realize that despite their failure to conceptualize the consumer, it was the consumption of Americans which had in fact undermined their vision of the new nation's political economy. At the start of the war, elite Republicans had simply assumed that Americans would support their political agenda by returning to the practices of non-consumption. By the end of the war, these same politicians had been forced by consumers to drastically revise their assumptions. Refusing to consent to the policies of commercial restrictions, consumers rejected both the Republican vision of political economy and the idea that their patriotism should be tied to consumer restraint. As a result, politicians were forced to invent a vision of the consumer that married buying and spending to civic obligation in a more positive light, fundamentally changing the place of the consumer in the political economy of the early republic.

The chapter starts by examining the meaning of the phrase "British goods" in the postcolonial context, first through an examination of American manufacturing in the early nineteenth century and second by locating that phrase more precisely in the flawed Republican efforts to create and maintain commercial restrictions between 1806 and 1815. The second part of the chapter looks at how the politicization of British goods sparked a discussion over necessity and luxury in the early republic, prompting Republicans and Federalists alike to consider the nature of the ideal consumer in new ways. As with any ideal however, the reality was somewhat messier. The third section of the chapter considers the ways in which the failures of the Republicans' policy combined with widespread commercial opportunism and consumer desire, to create a far more

realistic understanding of the consumer over the course of the decade. Finally, the chapter considers how these chastened realizations shaped an utterly different conception of the consumer by 1815: one that placed the collection of federal revenues through the tariff at the center of the consumer's civic obligations. Taking the popular refusal to consent to commercial restrictions as something more than simple consumer greed, this chapter argues that the failure of the Republican legislation signaled a new vision of what it meant to be patriotic and civic minded in the early republic.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Americans saw their material world through the lens of geography. As consumers and observers both, they possessed a keen awareness of where their goods came from in the world. Newspaper advertisements described goods by using their provenance as a label. Russian duck, Hessian rolls and Harlem fringe were common items on the front pages of newspapers.¹⁰ Merchants and auctioneers offered retailers the chance to buy English hats or Nuremberg wares.¹¹ Even when a specific place was not mentioned, it was still easy for consumers to identify the source of their purchase. Calicos, Baftas, Gurrahs and Nankeens were the textiles of the Far East; their names reflecting the cities where they had been made and shipped from.¹² Similarly Staffordshire ware connoted the cream colored pottery, first perfected by Josiah

¹⁰ *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser*, Oct. 6, 1800.

¹¹ On hats see *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser*, Jan. 1, 1802; on Nuremberg wares see *United States Gazette*, Feb. 19, 1807.

¹² Florence M. Montgomery, *Textiles in America 1650-1870* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), 152, 184-5, 254, 287.

Wedgewood and later emulated by other British potters from Staffordshire, that middling and elite Americans craved for their homes.¹³

Yet even without the nomenclature, Americans were well aware of what items came from where, particularly when goods came from abroad. In the early nineteenth century, American manufacturing abilities still remained highly limited. Thus lace, buttons and buckles were most often imported articles. Plated ware – sometimes called Britannia ware – and cutlery came from Sheffield as did other metal hardware such as nails and spikes. Above all, Americans still relied on manufactories in the west and north of England for their fine woolen broadcloths, bombazines, bombazets, cassimeres, wildbores and worsteds.¹⁴ These fabrics were on the whole easily recognizable by their feel, their weave, weight and finish.¹⁵ In a community that was highly textile literate, recognizing these fabrics and the items from which they were made, was not a difficult job, particularly when American observers contrasted the foreign textiles with American made cloth or homespun. “During the last three weeks we have attended the quarterly courts of Campbell, Amherst and Bedford,” wrote one reporter in Virginia. “Of the multitudes that attended these courts (not less than 12 or 15 hundred) not one in ten wore a stich [sic] of British or other foreign manufacture; and where a British coat appeared it was not a new one. It was a gratifying spectacle to behold a well looking, hardy people,

¹³ Regina Blaszczyk, *Imagining Consumers: Design and Innovation from Wedgewood to Corning* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 4-12; Christina H. Nelson, “Transfer-Printed Creamware and Pearlware for the American Market,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 15 (Summer, 1980): 93-115.

¹⁴ Montgomery, *Textiles in America*, 172, 173-175, 177-179, 374-377.

¹⁵ Americans clearly paid attention to fabrics and clothing more generally. See Betty-Bright P. Low, “Of Muslins and Merveilleuses: Excerpts from the Letters of Josephine du Pont and Margaret Manigault,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 9 (1974): 29-75. This textile literacy was not limited to women. See also David Waldstrieher, “Reading the Runaways: Self-Fashioning, Print Culture, and Confidence in Slavery in the Eighteenth Century Mid-Atlantic” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 65 (Apr. 1999): 243-272. However, these textile readings were not always foolproof. See for example, Michael Zakim, “Sartorial Ideologies: From Homespun to Ready-Made,” *American Historical Review* 106 (Dec. 2001): 1567.

neatly and cheaply dressed.”¹⁶ The author’s sartorial opinions notwithstanding, this report suggests that Americans could easily distinguish “British goods” from any other kind.

The political significance of British goods was magnified by the fact that Americans could not reproduce them domestically to meet demand. It was the limited productive capacity of the U.S. that made Americans’ material world readable through a national lens in the 1800s. Observing the state of American manufactures in 1810, Tench Coxe, one of America’s most ardent supporters of manufacturing, noted that despite the great advance in national capabilities, there was still vast room for improvement.¹⁷ Coxe’s report presented a vision of a nation that could provide itself with basic goods, but could not supply itself with what its middling and elite citizens understood to be the finer things in life. Despite the optimism that Coxe had for American manufacturing, his description of production in the U.S. reflected the checkered progress Americans had made since the Revolution. In terms of cotton goods, Coxe reported on the recent improvements in household carding machinery, spinning technology and dying practices which had made American cotton textile production more sophisticated. Coxe also noted with satisfaction that cotton goods were “substitutes for worsteds or stuffs of combed wool, and for silks, which are made of raw materials not yet considerable in the United States.”¹⁸ He was also pleased to note that Americans had concocted a way to re-produce

¹⁶ *American Monitor* (Plattsburgh, NY) Oct. 21, 1809.

¹⁷ Tench Coxe, “Digest of Manufactures” *American State Papers*, Senate, 13th Congress, 2nd Session, 677-689, <http://memory.loc.gov> [accessed Jan. 12, 2009]. It is important to note that Coxe’s observations also came after the imposition of the embargo, which had boosted American manufacturing by making importation that much harder. See below for more on the passage and effects of the embargo. On Tench Coxe and his long standing support of American manufacturing see Jacob E. Cooke, *Tench Coxe and the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 182-200. On the expansion of domestic manufacturing that had taken place in the 1780s and 1790s, see Lawrence A. Peskin, *Manufacturing Revolution. The Intellectual Origins of Early American Industry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 61-64.

¹⁸ Tench Coxe, “Digest of Manufactures,” *American State Papers*, 678.

a “good red cotton” that rivaled “Turkey yarn.” This allowed Americans to buy scarlet colored thread and cloth – which as Coxe pointed out was a “great *desideratum* in the manufacture of cotton”¹⁹ However, his notation that this dye was produced by pouring vinegar over iron suggests that the result would not be the purer colored scarlet that came from dying with the madder root and was certainly not the brighter and more coveted “Turkey red” – a famous dye that until the 1780s had not even been replicated in Europe let alone North America.²⁰

Americans were not having the same kind of success with woolen textiles. Coxe noted that Americans remained dependent on European sheep for their supply of wool and he hoped that in the following years Americans would make better use of their land resources to raise sheep, particularly merino, Barbary and other long-woolled sheep.²¹ However, even with a better wool supply, he noted that Americans remained unable to produce “scarlet, purple, garnet, crimson, claret, mauve and pea green” wools. Instead, American dyers were having success only with “drabs, bottle greens...and browns.”²² Coxe seemed sure that Americans were not interested in these fancy colors, but perhaps this was wishful thinking. Americans still followed London fashions and they could not have failed to notice that following the spring of 1808, red toned hues were all the rage. “Many splendid, appropriate and tasteful dresses are predominant,” noted a report from

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Susan Fairlie “Dyestuffs in the Eighteenth Century” *The Economic History Review* 17 (1965): 490-491, 508-509. The ability to get a pure bright stable red on cotton was coveted by American dyers. It could only be achieved through the careful use of madder. Cochineal, a red dye that worked well on wool, would not work on cotton, making red cottons more valuable and desirable. On cochineal see Amy Butler Greenfield, *A Perfect Red: Empire, Espionage and the Quest of the Color of Desire* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005); and on madder and ‘turkey red’ see Robert Chenciner, *Madder Red: A History of Luxury and Trade* (London: Curzon Press, 2000), 174- 204. For a good account of color and dyes more generally see Victoria Finlay, *Color. A Natural History of the Palette* (London: Random House, 2004). Thanks to Emily Pawley and also Erin McLeary of the Chemical Heritage Foundation for providing me with two of these references.

²¹ Tench Coxe, “Digest of Manufactures,” *American State Papers*, 678.

²² *Ibid.*, 678.

London reprinted in the *United States Gazette*. “Amaranth, ruby, purple, cocquelicot and bright amber are universal.”²³ Given that textiles in these tones had to be imported, they would have provided a vivid visual cue to any casual observer that a dress or coat in this color was not made in America.

In other areas, Coxe’s report revealed mixed success. Americans were not growing enough flax to meet the needs of linen manufacturers, despite the fact that they had weavers capable of producing good linens. Leather skins were widely available, but the goods produced were more often “the useful and necessary” and not “the fine and showy” pieces that could command a higher price. The manufacture of pottery had certainly expanded, but Americans had more success producing red clay pieces which were not as coveted as the creamy glazed “queensware” or British Staffordshire pottery produced in Britain. Finally, Coxe noted in frustration that Americans were having great difficulty in producing silk and silk thread, the latter of which made the “fringe, tassels, buttons and other fancy goods of taste and fashion.”²⁴ Although Coxe always remained optimistic about the possibilities that lay in store for American manufacturers, even he could not deny that there remained a great deal that Americans could not yet produce for themselves. In fact, by 1810 Coxe’s own research revealed that the nation still relied on household production for coarse cloth and even the cloth that Americans produced outside of the home was not considered the equal of British or Asian fabric.²⁵ Instead, trade remained at the center of America’s prosperity in the 1790s and on into the 1800s.²⁶

²³ *United States Gazette*, March 24, 1808. Amaranth was a red colored dye and cocquelicot was the French word for poppy, thus denoting a bright red-orange color. See also *United States Gazette*, April 28, 1808.

²⁴ Tench Coxe, “Digest of Manufactures” *American State Papers*, 680,681, 685-686. See also Peskin, *Manufacturing Revolution*, 135.

²⁵ Coxe noted that American factories produced only 147,000 yards of cloth compared to the 16.6 million yards made in the home. See Coxe, *Tabular Statements of the Several Branches of the American Manufactures... 1810* (Philadelphia: A. Cornman, 1813), 2. For an excellent discussion of the distinctions

The inability of American manufacturers to produce all these goods for their country had always been a bone of contention in American politics; one that went back to the politics of the Revolution. Benjamin Rush neatly summed up the relation between material and political dependence in 1775 when he wrote that “[b]y establishing manufactories among us, we erect an additional barrier against the encroachment of tyranny. A people who are entirely dependant upon the foreigners for food and clothes, must always be subject to them.”²⁷ In accordance with this judgment, pro-manufacturing men like Rush were soon pushing their new government to protect America’s infant manufactures with tariffs. Without protection, they argued, America would lose all its specie to Britain. Without protection Americans would be forced to import more than they could afford. Draining American reserves of specie to pay their debts would only serve to boost their rival’s economic power. Even with all their agricultural exports, they could not hope to earn back the massive debt that the American consumers of British goods created. In this gloomy vision of trade, pro-manufacturing advocates believed that an unfavorable balance of trade could only result in the re-creation of an imperial

Americans made between domestically produced cloth and imported textiles see Linzy A. Brekke, “‘To Make a Figure’: Clothing and the Politics of Male Identity in Eighteenth Century America,” in *Gender, Taste and Material Culture in Britain and North America*, ed. John Styles and Amanda Vickery (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 225-246. On development of textile manufacturing see Philip Scranton, *Proprietary Capitalism: Textile Manufacture at Philadelphia, 1800-1885* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983).

²⁶ See Douglass C. North, *The Economic Growth of the United States, 1790-1860* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1961); Gordon C. Bjork, “The Weaning of the American Economy: Independence, Market Changes and Economic Development,” *Journal of Economic History* 24 (Dec. 1964): 541-560; Gautham Rao, “The Production of Authority: Regulating the Market in the Age of Jefferson,” paper presented to the Joint Seminar of the Program in Early American Economy and Society at the Library Company of Philadelphia, Philadelphia PA., Feb. 20, 2009, 8.

²⁷ Benjamin Rush, quoted as an epigraph in Peskin, *Manufacturing Revolution*.

economy, one in which their purchase of foreign “gew-gaws” kept them in Britain’s rapacious grasp.²⁸

In contrast to this dire forecast, free trade advocates argued that commerce was the wellspring of America’s economic strength and civilization. For this reason alone, trade should remain unfettered. Arguing against the coming trade restrictions in 1806, Republican Congressman Nathan Williams of New York claimed that “commerce has a direct tendency to raise the price of the product of the farmer’s labor, by seeking in every part of the world the best markets for our articles of export and by bringing back and scattering through the country that circulating medium which cherishes industry and sweetens the toil of the laborer.” He went on to warn that without commerce, foreign merchants would come to America to buy U.S. agricultural exports, cutting American merchants out of the networks of trade and turning American farmers into “mere diggers of the soil,” for their old imperial rulers, a far more subservient and colonial posture than anything the consumption of foreign goods could create.²⁹ By allying commerce to agriculture in order to make his argument against tariffs, Williams drew upon the idea

²⁸ The phrase “gew-gaws” was often used to refer in a derogatory fashion to foreign luxury goods, in much the same way as we might use the word fripperies. See for example Jefferson to Madison in 1785, quoted in Burton Spivak, *Jefferson’s English Crisis: Commerce, Embargo and Republican Revolution* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1979), 4. The assumptions that the British were trying to undermine the American economy were not based merely on paranoia. Conservative British politicians, in particular Lord Sheffield, published pamphlets that fuelled American suppositions that the British hoped to make America dependent on them for all manufactured goods. See Roger G. Kennedy, *Mr. Jefferson’s Lost Cause: Land Farmers, Slavery and the Louisiana Purchase*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 102. See also J.C.A. Stagg, “James Madison and the Co-oercion of Great Britain: Canada, the West Indies and the War of 1812,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 38, (Jan. 1981): 4-15 and Cathy Matson and Peter Onuf, “Toward a Republican Empire: Interest and Ideology in Revolutionary America,” *American Quarterly* 37 (Autumn 1985): 520. For the best survey of American political economy in the early republic see Drew R. McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980). For a more in-depth look at the evolution of this pro-manufacturing mercantilist position see Peskin, *Manufacturing Revolution*, 5-6, 65-114.

²⁹ “Minutes of Proceedings in the House of U.S. Representatives” *Aurora General Advertiser* (New York), March 8, 1806.

that America's political economy comprised of three main interests – merchant, farmer and manufacturer – who would when working together, provided the economic foundation of the nation. While everyone agreed that all three needed to be in balance to allow the American economy to prosper, the question of how to maintain this balance became the key question of political debate in the early republic. Indeed, as international tensions heightened as a result of European encroachments on American commercial freedoms, these questions around trade and production became issues that organized the central political divisions of the day.³⁰

Indeed the power of this issue and the politics of the war combined to disrupt the familiar partisan agendas, creating a complicated political landscape that encompassed both bipartisan alliances and intra-party rifts. The Federalists, usually in favor of government support for commercial endeavors found that along with their mercantile support base, they were fighting tooth and nail to have the restrictions on their livelihood reversed. They were gradually joined in this effort by a number of wealthy commercial Republicans who shared the Federalist resentment towards government constraints on their business. In contrast, Jefferson and some of his Republican colleagues – realizing that America could not do without British manufactures – discovered that despite their mistrust of commercial legislation they would have to fight, through restrictions and eventually outright war, to re-instate America's privileged commercial status in relation to Great Britain.³¹ Jefferson believed that by enforcing the restrictions he could exact retribution on European powers and force them to permit free trade to flourish in the

³⁰ Matson and Onuf, "Toward a Republican Empire," 515-516. On the ways in which the party system was organized around the issue of free trade versus protection see Peskin, *Manufacturing Revolution*, 188-206.

³¹ On the question of how pro "free trade" Jefferson and Madison both were see Crowley, *The Privileges of Independence*, 33-34, 96-98.

Atlantic World. A third set of Republicans were horrified by Jefferson's turn towards the world of commercial restrictions. Gentrified farmers like John Randolph of Virginia cherished the hope that America could remain a nation where government hardly existed. They were firmly against any measures that threatened the expansion of an agrarian republic. Jefferson, caught between his old colleagues and his old Federalist enemies, struggled to chart a path that would eventually lead America back to his vision of an empire for liberty, commercial or otherwise.

When war between Britain and France broke out in 1793, both countries turned their attention and resources to the conflict, focusing their efforts on blockading their enemy and banning enemy goods from entering their ports in enemy ships. But these restrictions made both Britain and France dependent on neutral nations for the bulk of their commercial transactions. American merchants pounced on the opportunity to enhance their own business. Taking advantage of their new position as non-combatants in the Napoleonic Wars, they commenced a newly lucrative "carrying trade," which ferried sugar, coffee, fish, wheat, lumber, furs, finished goods and until 1808, slaves back and forth between Europe, the Caribbean, the American mainland and Africa.³² Like practiced dancers, they neatly stepped around the problem of carrying enemy goods by breaking their journey in the U.S – a move that allowed them to redefine their cargo as "neutral." As a result, trade boomed.³³

This prosperity came to a sudden end however in 1805. Under pressure from merchants and plantation owners in the British West Indies, who believed they were

³² Douglass C. North and Robert Paul Thomas, ed., *The Growth of the American Economy to 1860* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 9-10. See also Horsman, *The Causes of the War of 1812*, 31-34.

³³ Horsman, *The Causes of the War of 1812*, 31 and North and Thomas ed., *The Growth of the American Economy*, 175-178.

losing too much money to the American merchants, the British government sent instructions to the West Indian governors to close their ports to American goods except in the case of great necessity. The British also cracked down on the “broken voyage” subterfuge. A decision by a British court in 1805 concerning the American ship the *Essex*, stipulated that simply transporting enemy goods into a neutral country did not make the cargo neutral. Instead, a full duty would have to be paid. Any refusal to comply would result in the cargo being subject to seizure.³⁴ Furious, the New England merchants, led by Republican Jacob Crowninshield, began to demand that America assert its maritime and commercial rights.³⁵

Thus, in 1806 the phrase “British goods” took on a new political significance. On April 18th of that year, Congress passed the Non-Importation Act, which specifically banned an array of British goods from entering the country after November 15th. In part, the act was Jefferson’s response to the *Essex* decision, but more generally it was a rejoinder to the attacks that England had made on America’s commercial rights in the past twelve months.³⁶ The Non-Importation Act was intended to harm Britain’s commercial prospects by depriving English manufacturers of their best customers, forcing the British to re-instate America’s commercial privileges. In one way, this law was an echo of the Revolutionary politics of non-importation and non-consumption. By cutting the British off from their best market and by refusing to import and consume British goods, the Americans once again hoped to achieve the political goal of privileged commercial status. However, as a nation-state, America could now ostensibly control its

³⁴ Horsman, *The Causes of the War of 1812*, 39.

³⁵ McCoy, *The Elusive Republic*, 211-216. Not everyone supported the idea of Non-Importation to protect the carrying trade. Opposition to the idea came most famously from John Randolph of Virginia.

³⁶ McCoy, *The Elusive Republic*, 211-216.

borders and no longer had to ask for individuals to act voluntarily as they had during the Revolution. Thus, Jefferson's policy was a governmental response to the problem of imperial aggression and he chose to legislate that which he believed he controlled: importation through command of the national border. Mistakenly, Jefferson assumed that non-consumption would follow as a matter of course. It was his first step towards designing a new marketplace, one that he hoped would exact commercial retribution on the European powers which had attacked American prosperity.³⁷

The question of what constituted British goods thus became legally defined and symbolically important. The list included: "all articles of which leather, silk, hemp, flax, tin, (except in sheets) or brass was the material of chief value, all woolen cloths 'whose invoice prices shall exceed 5/sterling per square yard' woolen hosiery of all kinds, window glass and glassware, silver and plated goods, paper, nails, spikes, hats, ready-made clothing, playing cards, beer, ale, and porter, pictures and prints."³⁸ Noticeably missing from this list were the cotton goods that came from the East Indies; a trade that continued unhampered until 1807, despite efforts by the British East India Company to control it.³⁹ Other items were also missing. Staffordshire creamware, for example, was also still legally permitted to enter the U.S. But the list constituted a large majority of the goods that middling and elite Americans bought and enjoyed on a regular basis.

³⁷ Spivak, *Jefferson's English Crisis*, 2-66.

³⁸ Herbert Heaton, "Non-Importation, 1806-1812," *The Journal of Economic History* 1 (Nov., 1941): 179. This article along with Donald R. Hickey, "American Trade Restrictions during the War of 1812," *Journal of American History* 68 (Dec. 1981): 517-538, provide an excellent chronological overview of the commercial restrictions between 1806 and 1815.

³⁹ See for example the account book of Oliver Wolcott, who was the Secretary of the Treasury after Alexander Hamilton as well as a New York merchant. Oliver Wolcott, "Account Book" New-York Historical Society, New York, (hereafter N-YHS). See also Holden Furber, "The Beginnings of American Trade with India, 1784-1812," *The New England Quarterly* 11 (Jun. 1938): 235-265. Furber points out that Article XIII of the Jay Treaty (1794) allowed Americans to freely import American and European goods into India and export Indian goods to America, a freedom to indulge in the carrying trade that was unheard of when it came to West Indian and European goods. Thus this trade did not end until the embargo in 1807 prevented American ships from leaving U.S. harbors.

The Non-Importation Act was simply the beginning. Over the next ten years, Congress, led first by Jefferson and then Madison, enacted a series of laws that used American commerce as a weapon against Britain and France. These laws politicized the products of those countries but failed utterly to prove America's independence from the Atlantic marketplace. Unfortunately for Republicans, the Non-Importation Act lasted a mere five weeks before Jefferson was forced to suspend it. Treasury Secretary, Albert Gallatin, had quickly discovered that the loose language of the act made the law impossible to administer and enforce.⁴⁰ Consequently, his officers' confiscations were constantly challenged and overturned. Customs men who confiscated sacks of salt because the sacks were made of flax, a prohibited material, were soon ordered by the courts to return them.⁴¹ Similar problems arose with other packing materials, providing merchants with convenient loopholes and customs officials with little legal redress. At the same time, merchants demanded leniency for cargoes which had arrived after the November 15th deadline, claiming bad weather and other factors beyond their control. Given the clumsy wording of the law, the suspension of the Non-Importation Act in December 1806 was hardly surprising.

On December 14th 1807, nearly a year after its first passage, non-importation was reinstated by Congress, accompanied by a new bill to clarify the trickier portions of the act. But by this time the act was almost irrelevant. In June of 1807, British naval forces had fired upon the *USS Chesapeake*, in an attempt to recapture supposed British deserters. This attack was seen as unprovoked and illegal by most Americans and

⁴⁰ Albert Gallatin to Thomas Newton, Chairman of the Committee of Commerce and & Manufactures, December 5, 1807, H.R. 10A-B1, Documents Accompanying House Bill No. 16...[Bill introduced 8 December 1807], M1711, Roll 1 Unbound Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, 10th Congress, 1807-1809, RG233, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C.

⁴¹ Heaton, "Non-Importation, 1806-1812," 180.

Jefferson was particularly alarmed. In November 1807, Britain passed a new set of “orders in council,” which prohibited America from trading with any continental port. American commerce was now under attack. Jefferson’s response signaled his growing anxiety. He chose to embargo all American shipping, preventing American ships from leaving the U.S. in an attempt to keep their merchant fleet safe and ultimately prepare the nation for war. The Embargo Act passed Congress in December 1807.⁴²

Between December 1807 and March of 1809 Americans endured both Non-Importation and the Embargo, although the two acts did not throw as tight a net around the country as Jefferson might have liked. Ships which had left foreign ports before the Embargo’s December 14th deadline, but arrived in America after that date, were still allowed to land their goods.⁴³ The continued confusion over what the Non-Importation Act actually banned meant that many British goods made their way from warehouses to retailers. Philadelphia saw thirty-three vessels arrive from British ports in 1808, with twenty of those arriving after that act’s June cut off date.⁴⁴ Their manifests revealed cargoes of British goods that teetered on the edge of legality. Philadelphians, it seemed, were not feeling the ban as acutely as the laws might have suggested. It is also worth noting that neither law prevented British ships from bringing permitted goods into American ports and as a result even those newspapers that were staunchly pro-Jefferson, such as William Duane’s *Aurora*, published advertisements which announced the sale of

⁴² McCoy, *The Elusive Republic*, 217.

⁴³ Rao, “The Production of Authority: Regulating the Market in the Age of Jefferson,” 15-17.

⁴⁴ Heaton, “Non-Importation, 1806-1812,” 187. A similar situation prevailed in New York where the collector Peter Schenck confiscated nearly 60 consignments of prohibited goods in 1808 as well as 28 vessels which had violated the Embargo. Yet his efforts were undermined by the supplementary law that Congress passed in June 1808 which retroactively restored many of the seized goods to their owners. See Heaton, “Non-Importation, 1806-1812,” 185-186.

British goods in the spring of 1808.⁴⁵ In fact, the law had so many loopholes that Albert Gallatin warned all collectors in November of 1808 that any reports they made should “distinguish those of persons who have clearly contravened the laws, from those against whom the proofs may be doubtful,” in order to expedite the large number of pending appeals that merchants were filing against the confiscations.⁴⁶

These haphazard laws were replaced in March 1809 by a Non-Intercourse Act that released American ships back onto the waters, but prohibited all trade with Britain and France. Both Jefferson and the now incoming President Madison hoped that these laws would be easier to enforce and end the unpopular embargo. But this new law came with its own complications. Turning the maneuver of the “broken voyage” back against the Americans, British and French ships began to stop off at neutral Scandinavian ports such as Gothenberg and Tonningen, before continuing on to the United States. Worse still, Gallatin found it hard to keep up with the changing geo-political realities of an Atlantic world at war. “I have not sufficient information respecting the Ports of Biscay to give positive instructions,” he wrote to New York collector, David Gelston in May of 1809. “But, if, as we have understood, that province has been annexed to France, vessels entering its ports would be liable to the penalties of the non-intercourse act.”⁴⁷ Things became so bad that the port collectors themselves began to sympathize with the merchants. The collector for the port of Salem publically acknowledged that “so numerous and so complicated were the various restrictive laws with respect to commerce

⁴⁵ *Aurora* (Philadelphia), Mar. 3, Mar. 17, Mar. 24, Apr. 7 1808.

⁴⁶ Albert Gallatin to David Gelston, Nov 16, 1808 (Circular), Box 83, Folder “Letters to David Gelston, 1808-1810,” Gallatin Papers, N-YHS.

⁴⁷ Albert Gallatin to David Gelston, May 15, 1809, Box 83, Folder “Letters to David Gelston, 1808-1810” Gallatin Papers, N-YHS. See also Gallatin to Gelston, August 9, 1809, Box 83, Folder “Letters to David Gelston” Gallatin Papers, N-YHS.

that it was almost impossible for the most honest man to construe them correctly.”⁴⁸ By May 1810, Non-Intercourse was abandoned against both the British and the French.

Britain’s increasing attacks on American ships and commerce throughout that year pushed Madison to re-institute the ban on trade with the British in February 1811. Yet once again, the policy reversal and mercantile eagerness to make money meant that a large number of ships full of British goods were already on their way to the U.S. In the early spring of 1811, anxious merchants watched from the wharves as their precious cargoes arrived in American waters. Unsure of whether the cargo would be confiscated, they tried to stop the ships from landing. “[A] majority of the consignees in the *Sally-Ann* have ordered her to stand off and on till the collector can receive instructions from Washington,” wrote one anxious Boston merchant in April 1811. Hoping against hope, the merchants waited to see whether the Treasury would permit them to land their property. They didn’t have to wait long. “We rejoice to inform you that Orders have reached town this morning to...Bond the goods in the usual manner,” wrote the same merchant to his agent. “We cannot describe to [you] the relief that this favorable occurrence has given us.”⁴⁹ Legal loopholes once again meant that British goods had arrived in America in spite of the law’s intentions.

The outbreak of war in June 1812 brought with it a new wave of commercial restrictions. Many of these were focused on preventing American merchants supplying the British military forces with provisions. But in effect, they still attempted to prevent British merchandise from entering the U.S. Moreover, the pressing need for revenue also

⁴⁸ *Commercial Advertiser* (New York, NY), Jan. 20, 1810.

⁴⁹ Tuckerman and Rogers to Cushing, April 3, 1811, “Letterbook, 1810 to 1815,” American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass., (hereafter AAS). Thanks to Caroline Sloat for bringing this source to my attention.

prompted Congress to pass a law that placed double duties on imported items. This too had the effect of depressing the small amount of trade that continued. Nonetheless, the expectation that these laws would soon be lifted prompted many American merchants to ship their goods from Europe to the U.S., despite the restrictions. Once their ships arrived in American waters they were seized, only to be released by sympathetic federal judges and port collectors.⁵⁰ By the end of 1812, seasonal fall goods were widely available and the government had remitted most of the fines they had collected, making the ban on British goods moot in every way. In the early days of 1813, a revised non-importation bill died a legislative death in the Senate and the law limped on – present in the letter but not in the deed. By late 1813, a frustrated Madison and his Republican supporters passed the most stringent law yet. Recognizing that many British goods were entering the U.S. under a different flag, Madison prohibited certain products altogether: rum, woolen and cotton goods. He argued that these were almost always British in origin and thus should be entirely banned from American ports in order to prevent confusion.⁵¹

These restrictions remained in place for a few short months. In March 1814, with Napoleon defeated at Leipzig and northern European ports once again open to trade with the British, no one in America could see the point of Madison's Embargo. All restrictions were repealed by the summer of 1814 and American merchants hoped that finally they could return to the business of importing and exporting. But there was one final burden to be borne. Kept under blockade by the British and embarrassed by the smuggling that sustained British troops in Canada with American supplies, Republicans felt themselves to be humiliated and browbeaten by the British, as well as their own citizens. An

⁵⁰ Hickey, "Trade Restrictions During the War of 1812," 525.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 532.

infuriated committee of Ways and Means wrote the most draconian bill of the entire conflict, which permitted customs officials to search any vehicle without a warrant. Any person suspected of trading with the enemy was liable to have their goods seized. Moreover, buildings that were suspected of storing imported enemy goods or domestic goods ready to be shipped to the enemy could be searched and the goods confiscated. The Enemy Trade Act of 1815 was Madison's piece-de-resistance. It was the very apotheosis of commercial restriction, intended to harm the enemy through its stringent curtailment of American trade. It made British goods into a signal of treachery. But as the final act in a series of failed attempts to impose might through commercial legislation it is fitting that this law never got a chance to even be tested. The Treaty of Ghent ended the war only a few weeks later, and the commercial restrictions ended along with it.⁵²

Because of the failures which Republicans encountered in enforcing a marketplace of retribution, the long years of trade restrictions and embargoes left their mark on the ways in which Americans thought about British goods specifically and consumers more generally. First, the interdictions on certain goods had forced a prolonged public debate over what constituted a luxury and what constituted a necessity for Americans in the early republic. Second, the restrictions and the war itself revealed the limited extent of the civic allegiance American politicians could expect from citizens in an economic context. Discussion on this topic ranged widely, but one subject that caused particular consternation was the role that the consumer might be expected to take in fighting a commercial war. As Americans attempted to come to terms with the confusions and scarcity of a wartime marketplace, the newspapers of the day reflected the

⁵² *Ibid*, 536.

growing dissent among citizens over what kind of duties or rights a consumer had when the nation's economy was under attack and who in fact the ideal consumer actually was.

The grim restriction of the flow of imports into the country in 1806 forced Americans to consider the nature of consumer necessities, particularly as they tried to imagine their lives without British goods. To some, the loss was unacceptable. Republican congressman Joseph Nicholson of Maryland argued furiously against non-importation in early 1806. "[T]here [are] four articles of importance with which we are supplied from Great Britain which our habits at least have enrolled in the list of necessities and with which we cannot be supplied altogether either by ourselves or by other nations," he claimed in a speech to Congress. He went on to list woolen textiles, Caribbean rum, British hardware and salt as items which could not be banned, because Americans could not live comfortably without them.⁵³

His Republican colleague, Joseph Clay of Pennsylvania, echoed his associate's concern. "By the resolution before us we are prohibited from importing from G. Britain, any articles however necessary or convenient they may be."⁵⁴ Clay, certainly used the designation of "necessary" as a political tool. The rest of his speech to Congress suggests that his real concern was the loss of revenue that would result from such a drastic restriction and not the needs of consumers at all. But his decision to invoke the concept of "necessity" when it came to consumer goods implies that Clay believed that the needs of American consumers would provide him with political leverage. He used the term

⁵³ "Minutes of the Proceedings in the House of Representatives" *Aurora General Advertiser* March 8, 1806. Nicholson had already resigned from his seat by the time this debate was printed. See "Joseph Hopper Nicholson," <http://bioguide.congress.gov> [accessed Jan. 13, 2009].

⁵⁴ *United States Gazette*, March 17, 1806.

“necessary” to try and persuade Congress to drop their efforts at total restriction.

However, Clay’s appeal was made on shaky grounds and the instability of the term “necessity” robbed this strategy of its potency. If Americans had needs in 1806, no one was sure what they were.

As these debates became more antagonistic, Federalist sympathizers who had at first countenanced the governmental intervention as a means of protecting their long term commercial interests, began to worry that these restrictions were something more than commercial warfare. Instead, Federalists began to characterize the restrictions as part of a Republican effort to deprive Americans of essential goods. Reflecting on the mistakes of the Jeffersonian administration in the summer of 1807, one frustrated Federalist wrote “our present rulers...flatter themselves, on the one hand, with the practicability of starving England, when the provisions we furnish her with would not support the population three days out of three hundred and sixty five; and on the other hand, with the facility with which we could dispense with those things which we receive from abroad, though habit has rendered them essential and we have no competent means of making substitutes at home.”⁵⁵ This palpable anxiety arose from a growing conviction among Federalists that Jefferson had seriously misjudged the relative needs of Britain and America. But this anxiety was nothing compared to the suspicions that Jefferson had a hidden agenda when it came to the American consumption of British goods. “Our visionary politicians, when they talk of the necessities of life, go back to antediluvian ages and transport themselves within the temperate zones, where from the state of society

⁵⁵ “Reflections on the comparative effects of a WAR” *United States Gazette*, Aug. 13, 1807.

and the nature of the climate, nothing would be necessary of life but ‘food and a little raiment.’”⁵⁶

It is worth noting that this anxiety was centered entirely around the Federalists’ own habits and abilities as consumers. They were certainly not worried about the consumption of the great number of Americans, only about the possibility that they and their families might be cut off from the world of refined consumption that they knew and enjoyed.⁵⁷ Indeed, Federalists worried that Jefferson was attempting to drag elite Americans back to the dark ages, undoing the many decades worth of progress which had turned the country into a rival to its European counterparts. But, wrote the same author in the *United States Gazette* “[n]o patriotism however fervid, no distress however pressing, can now bring civilized man to this state of nature.”⁵⁸ As the embargo cast a gloomy shadow over American trade in the spring of 1808, the *Boston Gazette* echoed in ironic tones the idea that Jefferson was attempting to deprive Americans of consumer goods to drag them back to some pre-enlightened existence. Under the heading “40 Good Reasons for the Embargo,” the article read: “In short because it will tend to restore the Golden, the Patriarchal age, in which all men will turn Shepherds and be clothed in the skins of the Wild Beasts instead of those Gewgaws called British Broadcloths which luxury has unhappily introduced.”⁵⁹ As these articles suggest, the Federalists were not just concerned about the loss of commerce. Their protests reflected their incredulity that

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Michael Zakim emphasizes that early 19th century concerns about luxury as corruption were just as often concerns about a level of material comfort spreading beyond the elite classes. See Michael Zakim, *Ready-Made Democracy: A History of Men’s Dress in the American Republic, 1760-1860* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 32.

⁵⁸ “Reflections on the comparative effects of a WAR,” *United States Gazette*, Aug. 13, 1807.

⁵⁹ Quoted in the *United States Gazette*, March 3, 1808.

Jeffersonians were attempting to exorcize imported consumer goods from American lives through restrictive legislation.

Given the rhetoric that surrounded Republican characterizations of British goods in the late 1800s, perhaps Federalist fears had some foundation. Contrasting the situation between America and Britain, one author queried, “which [country] imports articles of sheer necessity and which articles of mere luxury? Are the flour and provisions of the United States imported by Britain and her colonies articles of luxury? Can they do without them?...Is cotton a luxury to Britain?” This barrage of rhetorical questions was intended to imply that the former colonial mistress could not survive without the supplies from their old colony. Satisfied that this point was clear, the article continued by shifting its gaze to America. “Are the *fine laced muslins* and *cambrics*, and *chintzes* of Britain articles of *necessity* – would our citizens *starve* or go naked without them? And would not our manufactures furnish all articles of *real* necessity?”⁶⁰ The ironic tone supplied the answer. Nothing that the Americans imported from Britain was a true necessity. Habits may indeed have made them *feel* indispensable, but if it came to a war, giving into habit was nothing more than a betrayal of one’s country. As the author ‘Public Safety’ put it:

“Self-interest is all these men think of: for the sake of trifling pelf they would rejoice to see our country prostrated at the feet of British tyranny: for my own part I would resign the luxuries of this life, and be contented under every misfortune, rather than submit to an indignity from any nation. What are luxuries and pelf, when compared to national honor? They are trifles light as air.”⁶¹

⁶⁰ “Non-Importation Act” *Aurora*, Dec. 10, 1806.

⁶¹ *Aurora*, Sept. 5, 1807. Pelf was an old fashioned term meaning riches or wealth but it also carried the connotation of pilfering and the ill-gotten gains of crime or war. Additionally it could be used to imply fripperies or junk. Thus the word was carefully chosen by this author to convey his disgust with the men who would give up their nation’s honor for this kind of wealth. See *The Oxford English Dictionary*, June 2008, www.dictionary.oed.com [accessed Jan. 20, 2009].

Yet even as the debate over luxuries took shape, it was increasingly clear that despite the ramifications for the consumer, the real focus was on the merchant importer. It was this figure that the Republican critics addressed themselves to, not the consumer whose needs remained imperative but whose actions remained implicit. In fact there was only one man who vocally addressed himself to the question of what the consumer might do in the face of this controversy, and that was William Duane, editor of the Republican mouthpiece, the Philadelphia *Aurora*.⁶² Duane's daily publication distilled the criticism of British goods into a scathing attack on the imagined wants of individuals. Duane blamed the mindless habits and subservient customs of middling and elite urban Americans for the continued desire for these ruinous foreign luxuries. The articles he published implored Americans to relinquish their luxuries for the good of the nation.⁶³ In their stead, Duane urged Americans to consume the products of their own country.

Duane's approach was to update the Revolutionary politics of non-consumption. In the 1760s, non-consumption had effectively meant the consumption of homespun fabrics, and a refusal to consume anything else. In the intervening five decades, American manufacturers had improved, so that non-consumption of British goods could in fact mean the consumption of some American made finished manufactured goods in particular textiles and ceramics.⁶⁴ Over time, Duane's newspaper became the mouthpiece for pro-manufacturing boosters as well as the small mechanics, artisans and manufacturers who were attempting to answer the rising demands for luxury goods that

⁶² On Duane see John K. Alexander, "William Duane," *American National Biography Online* <http://www.anb.org> [accessed Jan. 16, 2009].

⁶³ "For the Aurora, No. III" *Aurora*, Jan. 18, 1810.

⁶⁴ See Zakim, *Ready-Made Democracy* 11-36; Brekke, "'To Make a Figure,'" 225-246.

which had once been imported.⁶⁵ These small businesses offered a little something for everyone. Those in the market for finely wrought goods could buy A. Vitry's Gold and Silver Lace, or Caldcleugh and Thomas's American-made wall paper hangings. For those who were looking for a cheaper item the newspaper offered up birch bark hats: a cheap homemade alternative to the fur, chip and straw hats that came from abroad.⁶⁶

These businesses were not just signs of commercial success, they indicated a national success also. The *Aurora* was particularly pleased to sponsor businesses that offered direct competition to British and European manufacturing prowess. Thus in March of 1808 the newspaper published a small advertisement that read:

We have the pleasure to state, that we have in Philadelphia a manufactory, in which *gilt* and *plated* buttons are manufactured with much elegance and on as reasonable terms as any in Europe. The manufacture is carried on by Mr. *Armitage*...buttons with *devices, numbers, &c.*...may be seen at the Aurora book store.⁶⁷

By providing space for these newly established businesses, Duane was not only offered an alternative to imported goods; he also offered access to a marketplace that represented an escape from old imperial ties. By generating support for American manufacturing and providing American made goods, he believed he was freeing Americans from the grip of colonial dependence on British manufacturing. Duane efforts modified older Revolutionary policies of non-consumption with a politics of expanded "domestic" consumption. Instead of asking Americans to refrain and sacrifice, he asked them to

⁶⁵ For pro-mechanic rhetoric see for example "Politics for Mechanics," *Aurora*, Jan. 20, 1807; "Domestic Manufactures," *Aurora*, June 18, 1807; "On Manufactures," *Aurora*, June 25, 1807; "Constitution of Philadelphia Premium Society," *Aurora*, June 9, 1808; "For the Aurora," *Aurora*, Feb. 23, 1809.

⁶⁶ "A. Vitry," *Aurora*, Feb. 19, 1807; "New and Fashionable," *Aurora*, Sept. 17, 1807; "Improvement in Domestic Manufactures," *Aurora*, Jan. 7, 1808.

⁶⁷ "American Manufactures," *Aurora*, March 31, 1808. [Emphasis in text.]

redirect their consumer desires towards the burgeoning manufacturing endeavors of American producers.⁶⁸

This would of course entail some sacrifice. Duane, like Tench Coxe, realized that American manufactures could not yet produce the entire range of goods that Americans – especially middling and elite Americans – wanted for themselves and their homes. But Duane attempted to make a virtue of that scarcity. His vision of the perfect consumer was thus a simple rustic; a farmer who could do without the luxurious trappings of the city. In an imagined dialogue between a Pennsylvania farmer and the British foreign minister, David Erskine, Duane’s dream for American consumers became clear. The ideal consumer was one who promised to wear homespun cottons and linens and embraced the idea of “get[ting] quit of what city folks call fashion...[and] the handy dandy folks that look so fine and do nothing.”⁶⁹ By weaning themselves off imported luxuries and turning instead to American made necessities, the United States could effectively wage the kind of commercial war that Jefferson really hoped to fight. The abstinence that Duane

⁶⁸ I deliberately use the phrase “American producers” to encompass the many varieties of producer that Duane was encouraging, a variety that reflected the broad range of manufacturing activities that was taking place in the U.S at this point. This included those who produced within the household economy, individual artisans and craftsmen with small workshops, mechanics and craftsmen in a number of trades who had begun to set up larger commercial workshops and owners of larger manufacturing establishments such as those in Patterson NJ or Lowell, Mass. There is an excellent discussion of the ways terms to describe producers were changing in the 1800s and 1810s in Peskin, *Manufacturing Revolution*, 139-161. On household production the best account remains Rolla Tryon, *Household Manufactures in the United States, 1640-1860* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1917). On artisan and mechanic production in Philadelphia in particular see Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia 1800-1850* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980) and for a good account of the different types of factories that were growing up in both Pennsylvania and New England see Scranton, *Proprietary Capitalism*. The classic account of New York production is still Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 107-145 which provides an excellent description of metropolitan industrialization. For a discussion of women workers see also Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York 1789-1860*, 3rd ed. (1982; repr., Urbana and Chicago: Illini, University of Illinois, 1987).

⁶⁹ *Aurora*, June 2, 1808. The *Aurora* was not the only newspaper to identify the ideal consumer as a farmer. See also *Commercial Advertiser*, March 31, 1806; “Affairs with England,” *Public Advertiser* (New York, NY), June 5, 1807; “Encourage American Manufacturers,” *The Bee* (Hudson NY), Dec. 7, 1810; *Suffolk Gazette* (Sag Harbor, NY), Feb. 2, 1811.

applauded was the crucial foundation of Non-Importation, the Embargo and the Non-Intercourse act. To Duane, it seemed that this was the only way to truly break free from the old imperial economic circuits that Britain continued to impose on America.

As a result, his support of new manufacturing ventures, from individual workshops to entire industries was unflagging. Until 1804, he collaborated with Tench Coxe in the promotion of American manufacturing, in all likelihood giving this prolific author a platform from which to publish his views.⁷⁰ He also publically supported endeavors such as the Philadelphia Domestic Society and the Philadelphia Premium Society, by advertising their activities in the *Aurora*. The former society ran a warehouse that sold American made textiles, helping the members of the co-operative find a wider market for their goods, while the latter gave away premiums for innovations in American textile production.⁷¹ Duane's vision attempted to provide a practical alternative to the seduction of imported goods. Yet even he could not escape "British goods" entirely. His newspaper continued to advertise the arrival of new cargoes. His newspaper was after all a commercial concern and certainly needed the advertising revenues of merchants to survive.

Indeed the Republican rhetoric that surrounded British goods after the winter of 1806 made it quite clear that the success of Jefferson's commercial war depended in large part on the United States' ability to prevent these contentious commodities from reaching American customers. Of course, this strategy was familiar to a generation of Americans who had fought and won a Revolutionary War. That conflict had also used goods to

⁷⁰ Peskin, *Manufacturing Revolution* 95-96.

⁷¹ "Silk Worms" *Aurora*, July 16, 1807; "MANUFACTURERS" *Aurora*, Nov. 5, 1807; "Constitution of Philadelphia Premium Society" *Aurora*, June 9, 1808. See also Peskin, *Manufacturing Revolution*, 165-166.

manifest a literal rejection of an economic order as well as to display a symbolic resistance to an imperial culture.⁷² The echoes of that battle had not been forgotten by the 1800s. On occasion, newspaper reportage referred back to the War of Independence, contrasting the current conflict with the successful efforts of an earlier generation.⁷³ But these articles usually referred to a spirit of resistance rather than any specific strategy. This was particularly true when it came to the question of organized consumer boycotts, which was almost entirely passed over by public debate and references to the revolutionary tactic of non-consumption were sporadic. In 1808, the *Aurora* took the trouble of reprinting the portion of the *Annals of Congress* from 1774, in which Congress agreed that as an “effectual security for the observance of *non-importation* we, as above, solemnly agree and associate that from this day we will not purchase or use...any of those goods, wares or merchandize, we have agreed not to import.” Printed to remind readers that the policy of non-importation was simply not effective without the backing of consumers, this rare direct reference seemed to fall on deaf ears. Indeed, despite the *Aurora*’s support of homespun and “domestic” consumption, the idea that Americans should practice non-consumption the way that the revolutionary generation did never seemed to materialize in the newspaper’s pages.

This silence on “non-consumption” can be explained in two ways. First, as mentioned above, was the naïve assumption that consumers would simply reinforce the policy of Non-Importation and Non-Intercourse by refraining from consuming imported goods.

⁷² See T.H Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁷³ See for example “A Melo-Drama,” *Aurora*, Nov. 13, 1806; “Affairs with England,” *Public Advertiser* (New York, NY), June 5, 1807; *Spectator*, Aug. 8, 1812.

Indeed, the Republicans who crafted the restrictions seemed to have believed that Americans would automatically restrain their consumption to match national policy. They were mistaken. The second explanation emanates from the messy realities of the early republican marketplace, that undercut the idealized vision that men like Duane cherished. Many law-makers quickly realized that non-consumption was impossible to legislate and the idealized Republican vision of the farmer consumer was really a joke. In fact, when Republican Congressman William Wyatt Bibb of Georgia introduced a resolution to the House in the spring of 1808 that called for members of the House of Representatives to only wear “the manufactures of their own country” at their next meeting, his idea was met with derision, even from members of his own party.⁷⁴ Republican Nathaniel Macon argued that “he would never agree to a resolution which [Congress] could not enforce.” John Rhea of Tennessee, also a Republican, sneered that he “would appear in what clothing he chose, this resolution notwithstanding,” aptly demonstrating how little force Congress had when it came to this matter.⁷⁵

The joke did not stop there. When a fellow congressman noted that he would have to wear homespun if he wanted to support this resolution, Macon retorted that he did not think it was fair “that those like him [who] had no wives at home to make them coats should not only be reproached for their misfortune but pointed at as sinners.”⁷⁶ Macon also had a retort for the same congressman who had expressed a wish to see the women of the nation wear domestically manufactured goods. He joked that it would be impossible to get a lady anywhere in the nation who would agree to such a resolution

⁷⁴ “Congress. House of Representatives, Reported for the United States Gazette,” *United States Gazette*, April 28, 1808.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

adding “[h]ad I a wife, I should be willing to see her dressed to her own satisfaction. The ladies have a right to dress as they please.”⁷⁷ Underneath the dull witticisms about female fashion lay a more important point. Macon, like others, believed that a nation could not control its citizens’ consumer choices. Nor in fact should they try. Even ardent supporters of Revolutionary non-consumption had witnessed its failures. His rhetoric implied that an organized boycott was not only unrealistic but it was no longer acceptable to American citizens. They had a right to buy what they liked, no matter what trade restrictions were in place.

Of course, not everyone took such a sanguine approach to women’s consumption. There were many calls for women in particular to produce and wear homespun cloth.⁷⁸ At Fourth of July celebrations and Republican gatherings there was always one toast to American women, either exhorting them to relinquish European fripperies or praising them for donning homespun.⁷⁹ But even with the predictable levels of interest in female fashions, it seemed that what men wore caused just as much consternation. The members of Congress and the President himself generated particular notice. Newspaper articles monitored their clothing, praising them when they wore homespun and chiding them when they wore imported items.⁸⁰ When Congressmen were caught “helmeting their heads in British hats,” angry observers took it as an insult to domestic manufacturers.⁸¹ In all, female consumption did not appear to fall under particular scrutiny and in all the

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ A typical example is “For the Aurora,” *Aurora*, Feb., 23, 1809

⁷⁹ See for example “Republican Festival at Greenbush,” *Farmers’ Register* (Lansingburgh, NY), June 23, 1807 or “Fourth of July,” *Democratic Press* (Philadelphia), July 15, 1807.

⁸⁰ *Daily Advertiser* (New York, NY), Dec. 11, 1808 and “From the National Intelligencer,” *Public Advertiser* (New York, NY), Jan. 9, 1809.

⁸¹ “Non-Importation,” *Aurora*, Dec. 5, 1806.

retorical compliments of non-consumption, both genders seemed to have received an equal amount of attention.

But the political skepticism about non-consumption was about more than a rejection of the idea that consumers were obliged as citizens to regulate themselves. The dismissal of non-consumption was also an acknowledgement that the Federal government was unable to construct an impervious boundary around the country. This failure had two causes. First, the government lacked the bureaucratic structure to truly enforce the ban and second, the government needed to maintain a certain level of commerce to preserve revenues.⁸² Because of this, many shipments of imported goods arrived legally after 1806 as a result of the willingness of American merchants to do everything they could to get around the spirit of the restrictions, while adhering to the letter of the law. Hoping to take advantage of the short interludes of reprieve that punctuated the long periods of restriction, canny merchants made sure that they followed the workings of Congress on a day-to-day basis, waiting for a snippet of news that would determine whether they could bring in their goods or not.

However, the business of anticipating political decisions was fraught with worry. In March of 1810, the firm of Tuckerman and Rogers wrote to their agent in London trying to find a way to make the best of a bad situation. "In our letter of yesterday," they wrote,

we recommended you to suspend your arrangement for Fall Purchases 'till you heard the intercourse was open. On further reflection we find it may be three or four weeks before we may have an opportunity to write you again, and as the market will in all probability be better supplied when this reaches you...together with the great importance of having the goods early, has determined to request

⁸² On the failure of bureaucratic structures see Rao, "The Production of Authority: Regulating the Market in the Age of Jefferson" and on revenues Robin L. Einhorn, *American Taxation, American Slavery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 111-156.

you to give out our Fall memorandums as soon as this reaches you, provided Mr. Williams apprehends no hazard from the disposition and intentions of the British Government towards the United States.⁸³

Three weeks later, confident that the legislation would be lifted, they urged their agent to fill the order fast. Of course, they were frustrated that the legislation had robbed them of a season of profitable trade. But, they concluded,

Government can not however rob us of the consolation of having done our duty to our Country as well as our consciences, and we must now be content to rest on the hope of doing as much better in the fall as will in some degree make up the loss.⁸⁴

It is notable that these two merchants believed that their strict adherence to the letter of the law was enough. Although it is likely that they well understood the premise of non-importation as a means of weakening the British economy, they felt no remorse for anticipating the end of the restrictions. On the contrary, they felt proud that they had resisted the temptation to trade and made their fall order in good conscience. Their window of opportunity turned out to be short. By February 1811, non-intercourse with Britain was reinstated.

Some firms were clearly not as observant of the letter of the law and British and French goods did arrive in America even when they were supposed to be banned. Pleas from merchants that shipments had arrived in port late due to bad weather usually persuaded customs officials that they should permit the goods to land. More often, late shipments would be confiscated only to be restored by a sympathetic judge or because of powerful connections.⁸⁵ One of the strangest stories to emerge from the confusion of

⁸³ Tuckerman and Rogers to Cushing, March 29, 1810, "Tuckerman and Rogers Letterbook, 1810 to 1815," AAS.

⁸⁴ Ibid. Apr. 30, 1810.

⁸⁵ For an account of how New Jersey judge Robert Morris allowed goods through see "From the Fredonian," *Columbian* (New York, NY), Dec. 21, 1811. See also Rao, "The Production of Authority: Regulating the Market in the Age of Jefferson," 15-17.

1812 involved Stephen Girard, the rich and well connected Philadelphia merchant. In December of 1811, Girard had ordered that his ship, the *Good Friend*, leave England with a cargo of dry goods. Of course, the savvy Girard was well aware that the non-intercourse law was still in effect. Nonetheless, he fully expected that the *Good Friend* would be permitted to land. This exception was due to slightly unusual circumstances. Earlier that year, Girard, along with other anxious merchants who had capital tied up in Britain, petitioned the government for permission to buy goods and import them back to the U.S. so that they would not lose their assets if war broke out. Quietly and informally, permission was granted and Girard instructed Barings Bank to release his funds so that he could purchase a large shipment of British goods.⁸⁶ This done, the *Good Friend* set sail. But Girard, for reasons unknown, did not trust that the goods would land safely at a U.S. port. Instead, he instructed the captain and supercargo to land at Amelia Island, the swampy Spanish island port off the coast of East Florida.⁸⁷

Thus began a series of strange incidents. Attempting to avoid Spanish customs duties, the captain and supercargo claimed they had arrived at Amelia Island due to bad weather, hoping they could stay just long enough to gain permission to land in the United States. This ploy could not last long, and soon Spanish customs agents were sniffing around the ship. But as the two hapless employees attempted to extricate themselves from this bureaucratic tangle, the United States invaded Amelia Island and claimed it as an American territory, along with the rest of East Florida. Girard's cargo was now, despite all his careful instructions, landed at an American port. Surprised by this sudden change in circumstances, Girard asked his contacts in Washington D.C. how to keep his ship

⁸⁶ John Bach McMaster, *The Life and Times of Stephen Girard: Mariner and Merchant*, (Philadelphia and London: J.B. Lippincott, 1918), 2:179, 183.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:177-178, 180, 192.

from being seized for a violation of the non-intercourse act. The government contacts responded that he should pay normal duties and instruct the ship to make for Philadelphia. Accordingly, Girard bonded his cargo, but his plan failed. As the *Good Friend* was sailing up the Delaware it was captured by the over zealous Collector of the Port of Wilmington. Girard was forced to go to trial to retrieve his property, a trial which he won. The chastened collector at Wilmington was instructed by Gallatin to release the goods in May of 1812, and Girard took them back to Philadelphia in triumph.⁸⁸

This twisted tale was mangled still further by various local newspapers. While some reported that a new cargo of British goods had landed without Gallatin's permission, others told the story that Girard and Gallatin had cooked up a deal, thus allowing British goods to land legally, despite the letter of the law. "Letters from *Philadelphia* and one of the ministerial papers, state that the British goods on board three vessels which arrived at that port from Amelia-Island and have been by orders from Mr. Gallatin, admitted to entry without bonds. Like the Comet, hereto "*hangs a tail*," wrote a Boston newspaper. Accusing Gallatin of making an exception for a "rich democrat" like Girard, the newspaper accused the two of evading the law.⁸⁹ As stories such as these began to circulate, mercantile strategies for getting British goods into the United States legally became well known. These stories generated a great deal of consternation. The merchants' acts were clearly wrong and the newspaper reports made no bones about that. But consumers were somehow free from blame, since the newspaper editors concluded

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 194- 197.

⁸⁹ For reports that Girard's importation was illegal see *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser*, Apr. 21, 1812. For the quoted report that suggested a deal was made despite the law, see "Gross Partiality," *Commercial Advertiser* (New York), May 15, 1812. The report was a clipping from a Boston newspaper. See also "British Goods," *Mercantile Advertiser* (New York, NY), May 9, 1812 and *New York Herald*, May 30, 1812.

that individual shoppers had little way of telling which goods had arrived legally and which had not. As citizens, Americans had to obey the law of the land, not sacrifice their interests in a display of republican virtue as they had when they were imperial subjects rebelling against a colonial authority.

But the question of whether citizens *could* faithfully uphold the law was another matter. The blurring of lines between legal and illegal goods made patriotic restraint hard to sustain. Beyond the legal loopholes, there was a large degree of confusion over what had entered the country legally. Legitimate sources of imported goods also provided cover for the sale of illegally imported goods. Auction sales were one source of confusion. On the one hand customs agents used auction houses to sell off British goods brought in by American privateers. This meant that the goods had been forcibly taken from British ships, and thus their presence in the U.S. could be interpreted as an economic blow against the enemy. Moreover the sale of these goods meant income for the government, because the goods captured by the privateers became in part the property of the U.S. government.⁹⁰ On the other hand, auctions were also notorious for allowing merchants to dispose quickly of contraband goods. Since retailers bought both these kinds of goods at auction and then undertook to sell them to the public, consumers who believed they were buying the spoils of war could in fact have been purchasing smuggled goods.⁹¹ In all, the silence about organized non-consumption could well be attributed to

⁹⁰ Both the *Aurora* and the *United States Gazette*, two newspapers with such opposing political views, are full of these auction notices. Browsing through the newspapers reveals auction sales occurring on a weekly basis.

⁹¹ On the ambiguity of the auction sale see Ira Cohen "The Auction System in the Port of New York, 1817-1837," *Business History Review* 45 (Winter, 1971): 489. On privateering see for example "Rich Prizes," *Weekly Aurora* (Philadelphia), Nov. 1, 1814. See also Jerome R. Garitee, *The Republic's Private Navy: The American Privateering Business as Practiced by Baltimore during the War of 1812* (Middletown: Mystic Seaport Inc., 1977) and Gautham Rao, "Visible Hands: Customhouses, Law, Capitalism and the Mercantile States of the Early Republic, 1789-1816" (PhD. Diss., University of Chicago, 2008), 423-440.

the fact that Americans faced a complicated marketplace as a result of the commercial restrictions that the government put in place. Although consumers were capable of identifying British goods and in all likelihood knowing when the entry of those goods to the United States was illegal, they had no way of knowing if their goods had entered legally or illegally. As a result they could never be sure if what they had just bought was a symbolic blow for their nation or a strike against it.

These uncertainties over provenance and legality must surely have faded as the war dragged on. Governmental concerns about smuggling had become more noticeable in late 1811, as the effects of the non-intercourse law took hold. But by 1813 the newspapers were full of tales that described the sheer magnitude of America's furtive trade in forbidden goods.⁹² While one interpretation of smuggling is to see it as a deliberate form of protest against encroaching capitalist structures – similar to poaching or wrecking – more recent analyses of smuggling have noted it was not only the poor or working class who engaged in smuggling. In fact quite the opposite.⁹³ Wealthy elites and middling merchants were also engaged in this form of free trade, sometimes in concert with their less wealthy counterparts. In this light, it is better to see the act of bringing in contraband goods as an adherence to either borderland economies or wider economic

⁹² See for example "Message of President Madison: Communicated on Tuesday November 5, 1811," *American State Papers*, 12th Congress, 1st Session, Foreign Relations: vol. 1, 78, www.memory.loc.gov [accessed Jan. 19, 2009]. See also Albert Gallatin, *Letter from the Secretary of the Treasury to the Chairman of the Committee of Commerce and Manufactures Relative to Evasions of the Non-Importation Act, December 2, 1811* (Washington: A & G Way, 1811).

⁹³ On smuggling as capitalist protest see Cal Winslow, "Sussex Smugglers," in *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth Century England*, ed. Douglas Hay, E.P. Thompson et al. 1975 (London: Penguin, 1977), 119-166. For an example of how to explore smuggling as part of a much more complex pattern of existing trade networks see Michelle Craig McDonald, "The Chance of the Moment: Coffee and the New West Indies Commodities Trade," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series., 62 (Jul. 2005): 441-472 www.historycooperative.org [accessed March 30, 2009].

circuits which had been fragmented by international borders or national legislation.⁹⁴

Smuggling then may not necessarily be only about taking back market share but it might also be about anticipating and supplying a consumer demand.

Anticipating consumer demand was something that American merchants were well equipped to do. Successful merchants in the western hemisphere were those who could effectively anticipate their customer's demands and desires several months before their patrons were ready to buy. The realities of the transatlantic dry goods trade meant that merchants had to order their spring goods the previous fall and their fall goods in the previous spring, if their consignments were to reach the marketplace on time. Tuckerman and Rogers, the Boston merchants who would be anxiously awaiting the arrival of their ships in 1811, certainly tried to read the market and anticipate a variety of consumers.

Ordering woolens from their agent in 1810 they wrote:

What are called Superfines...are quite unlike the things we used to have...The Fact is that this sort of half way article does not answer but in times of scarcity. It is not a prime article for Town Trade and too expensive for the Country. Few supers [superfine woolen cloth] comparatively are wanted for [the] Country[,] none are disposed to buy Goods above six Dollars a yard.⁹⁵

Letters like these suggest that merchants who did engage with smuggling may have done so with exactly this kind of mindset: anticipating what their customers would want to buy, despite the illegality of the importation. Consumers are rarely examined in discussions of smuggling, since it is often assumed that the consumer would have had no way of knowing the provenance of their purchased items. Yet, during the War of 1812, smuggling was well publicized, foreign goods were recognizable and consumers were

⁹⁴ See Smith, *Borderland Smuggling*, 3.

⁹⁵ Tuckerman and Rogers to Cushing, October 18, 1810, "Tuckerman and Rogers Letterbook, 1810-1815," AAS.

perforce aware of the origin of imported goods.⁹⁶ Set against this context, the consumption of imported goods during the war made the consumer into one of the incentives behind illegal wartime commerce.⁹⁷

It is impossible to say how much smuggling existed between 1806 and 1815. Long before the war, smuggling was an entrenched part of the Atlantic World. Indeed, wherever mercantile restrictions existed, smuggling would exist alongside them. It was an activity that nearly everyone had the opportunity to engage with in some small way. Merchants, inn keepers, farmers and sailors all engaged in this illicit trade, supplying communities with contraband goods when other tariffs and restrictions made the price of items too high. As Joshua Smith points out in his study of the Passamaquoddy Bay smugglers, sometimes these exchanges were a result of long established networks and careful planning, and on other occasions simply a question of opportunity. In other words, smuggling was so deeply entrenched in both the colonial and post-colonial economy of America, that it was widely accepted as part of the early republic's political economy.⁹⁸ This did not change during the war. One New Brunswick merchant calculated that half a million pounds worth of contraband goods went through his warehouse and into the American market. Similarly, a Boston customs collector reckoned that by late 1814 there was some \$3 million worth of goods set to enter Maine from Halifax and Castine.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ On newspaper discussions of smuggling see for example *Independent American* (Ballston, New York), Aug. 27, 1811; *Albany Register*, Oct. 11, 1811; "From the New York Mercantile Advertiser: Communication *Cooperstown Federalist*, Oct. 26 1811; "To the Editors" *Otsego Herald*, Sept. 25, 1813; *Evening Post* (New York) Dec. 28, 1813; *Otsego Herald*, Jan. 8, 1814.

⁹⁷ Not all of this smuggling was importing consumer goods for retail. Much of it was the smuggling out of gypsum (plaster of Paris) and provisions. See Smith, *Borderland Smuggling*, 66-80.

⁹⁸ Smith, *Borderland Smuggling* 13.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

The routes that smugglers used to get their goods into the U.S varied widely during the war. The swampy borderlands of East Florida, including Amelia Island, provided one convenient entry point. Some smugglers were more brazen, taking advantage of the complexity of the restrictive laws to fool customs officials. Merchants colluded with British manufacturers, who made their textiles look like the products of neutral countries like Portugal. Merchants then packaged these British goods as Portuguese shipments and moved them from Liverpool to Lisbon and then to New York or Boston. Relying on administrative ignorance to get their cargos safely into the United States, they paid their bonds in order to maintain the illusion of legality.¹⁰⁰ On other occasions, smugglers would attempt to exploit the poorly policed shore lines of New Jersey and New York.¹⁰¹ Since the customs officers were unable to keep tabs on such an expansive littoral stretch, these smugglers often managed to slip their goods ship to shore and then directly into nearby New York with the help of local communities. If however they were caught, they could always claim they were blown ashore by bad weather and then rely on sympathetic judges to protect them and their cargo.¹⁰²

Yet by far the most profitable route for smugglers remained the route from Canada into the United States. This trip was particularly lucrative, as both British and American importers chose to keep large stockpiles of British manufactured goods on hand in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, ready to be moved into the U.S at a moment's notice. These merchants had two options: either wait and trade legally during a suspension of the restrictions or take a risk and move their goods in illegally if other

¹⁰⁰ "To the Editors" *Herald* (Otsego, NY) Sept. 25, 1813.

¹⁰¹ Albert Gallatin to David Gelston, Oct. 21, 1811, Gallatin Papers, Box 83, Folder "Letters to David Gelston July, 1811-1812," N-YHS. See also "Trenton" *Evening Post* (New York, NY), Dec. 28, 1813.

¹⁰² "From the Fredonian," *Columbian* (New York, NY), Dec. 21, 1811.

means proved impossible. But the latter was no easy feat. James Buckley, a New York dry goods merchant, warned his brother in England that the act of smuggling goods from Canada was not to be taken lightly. "I would advise you not to ship any goods to Canada," he wrote in November of 1811. "As I suggested before, it has become difficult to smuggle goods into this country, several people have had their goods seized and no doubt will be condemned even after they have got them into this City in that the country swarms with spies and informers and I think it would be very imprudent to attempt to do anything that way."¹⁰³

Abel Buckley clearly did not take his brother's advice. In August of 1812 he was still badgering him for information, which James grudgingly gave up. "If you should adventure," he wrote, "I think St Johns[,] New Brunswick would the best place. But," he added, "I cannot recommend you to send your goods to any of these places."¹⁰⁴ James' ambivalent advice and Abel's determination resulted in disaster for them both. In September 1812, James wrote to tell Abel that the ship *Euphrates* had been captured off the coast of Newfoundland by American privateers and brought into Newport where she was libeled in breach of the Non-Importation Act. The British goods on board, which belonged in part to the Buckleys, were confiscated and James had to pay very heavy fines to get them back. James noted sourly that some of the goods had been damaged by rats, but he was able to sell them off for the most part. It was a sorry end to their adventure.¹⁰⁵ Nonetheless, it is worth noting that these British manufactured goods still made it into the American marketplace. Even unsuccessful smuggling ventures could provide a means for forbidden goods to make it to American customers.

¹⁰³ James Buckley to Abel Buckley, Nov. 6 1811, "Buckley Letterbook," N-YHS.

¹⁰⁴ James Buckley to Abel Buckley, Aug. 5, 1812, "Buckley Letterbook," N-YHS.

¹⁰⁵ James Buckley to Abel Buckley, Sept. 22, 1812 and Nov. 10, 1812, "Buckley Letterbook," N-YHS.

If the Buckleys were unsuccessful, hundreds more managed to navigate the routes from Canada into Vermont, Maine and upstate New York with alarming ease. Newspapers reported mile-long lines of wagons baring loads of British goods wending their way through Saratoga, Waterford and Troy.¹⁰⁶ The particular lure of this route was that any one with a little cunning and ingenuity could make a successful run. Newspapers reported smugglers with sleighs crossing into Vermont and others coming down Lake Champlain in rafts and boats.¹⁰⁷ Eastport became the epicenter of smuggling activity as men made the short hop from Canada back to Maine with practiced ease.¹⁰⁸ As stories in the newspapers increased, it must have been clear to the consuming public that many of the new British goods that reached the marketplace must have been smuggled in. Yet far from acting as a deterrent, there seemed to be public support for smugglers and for the goods they brought in.

One particularly stunning event took place in early 1814. In March of that year, an inspector for the port of Boston ‘George Johnson’ received information that a Jeremiah Wetherby was illegally importing goods from Canada into the United States. Johnson tracked down Wetherby on the road, stopped him and asked to examine his load. According to Johnson, Wetherby and his wife protested the search immediately, asking to see his commission and questioning the legitimacy of the search. When that failed, Wetherby got confrontational. Struggling to get past him, Johnson soon discovered a trunk containing “British goods, consisting of broadcloths, silks, stockinets, shawls, cambrics and files.”¹⁰⁹ Satisfied with his find, Johnson ordered his colleague Mr. Ford to

¹⁰⁶ “What Does This Mean,” *Patriot* (Saratoga, NY), Oct. 7, 1812.

¹⁰⁷ *Star* (Long-Island), March 16, 1814 and *Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser*, July 21, 1814.

¹⁰⁸ Smith, *Borderland Smuggling*, 49-80

¹⁰⁹ *Evening Post* (New York NY), March 31, 1814. [Emphasis in text].

join him in taking the entire haul back to the custom's office in Cambridgeport. Johnson, it turned out, needed the support. All the way back, he was dogged by a crowd of fifteen men, who yelled abuse and assaulted the wagon. Yet Johnson held firm. It was only when he reached Cambridgeport did he realize he was outnumbered. There, in the town, a mob of "two or three hundred people" waited to rescue the goods from the customs officers.¹¹⁰ Although the two frightened men managed to hide the load in the custom's house, they had to run from the crowd. Jostled and pelted with verbal and physical abuse the pair managed to escape the town's wrath. Johnson described the last portion of his ordeal with particular horror:

Last night my house was surrounded by a mob, who threatened *me*, and declared that I should be *tarred and feathered*. That no officer of the customs should live at Cambridgeport, or come there to seize goods. Since I left home this morning to come into town, I have received...information that Ford has been taken up on a complaint of said Wetherby, for highway robbery and that a warrant has been issued for my arrest.¹¹¹

In an inversion of Revolutionary politics, the crowd at Cambridgeport used the threat of the old Patriot punishment of tar and feathers to get their way and protect the British goods that had arrived in town with Wetherby. Nor was this violent outburst an effort to conserve foodstuffs. This was not the rage of a starving crowd. Instead, the town directed its wrath against a man who was attempting to deprive them of a valuable load of silks and cambrics. Whether they planned to wear them themselves or, more likely, sell this valuable stock on for a profit is not clear. Either way, this tale and other reports of widespread smuggling reveal that even as the war against Britain entered its last bitter months, Americans continued to bring non-essential British goods into the country.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid. For another example of customs officers being threatened with the "tar and feather" treatment see "Non-Intercourse" *Albany Register*, Oct. 13, 1811.

The popular protection of smuggling might simply be understood as a response to the growing poverty and scarcity. But it is just likely the Cambridgeport community was attempting to preserve their commercial rights. These smugglers and the communities that helped them believed that they would easily be able to sell these luxury imported goods on to retailers and ultimately consumers and this was a trade they believed they were entitled to pursue. They could hardly be blamed for such a believing that their efforts would be profitable. Between 1806 and 1815, newspapers continued to publish articles that informed readers of the latest updates in London fashions. These articles didn't just advise as to cut or length. They were practical guides that provided instructions on fabric choice and color, both factors that demanded imported textiles. Thus, one such article from May of 1814, only two months after the Cambridgeport attacks instructed interested consumers that a fashionable promenade dress for April must be made of fine cambric and trimmed with "blossom colored muslin"; that stylish morning dress should be composed of "fine jaconet muslin" and "small buttons" and that evening dress should consist of a 'Frock of the finest India muslin...and white lace.' The same article also informed ladies that the newest item of every fashionable woman's wardrobe was a "Chapeau Bra" a short hooded cloak that should be made in pastel shades of satin.¹¹² For anyone interested and wealthy enough, here was all the information needed to dress as any fashionable lady of London would in the spring of 1814. All of the textiles that the article listed were beyond the capabilities of American producers. But such articles indicated that there remained throughout the war a demand for these goods,

¹¹² "London Fashions for April," *Commercial Advertiser* (New York), May 19, 1814. This type of article was a common feature of newspapers and were so popular that they also warranted publication as a book. See for example *The Mirror of Graces or the English Lady's Costume...By a Lady of Distinction* (New York: I. Riley, 1813).

which were clearly recognizable as enemy productions. Moreover, articles like “April Fashions” and encounters such as those at Cambridgeport implied that despite the war, Americans would still buy British goods and that William Duane and the Republican’s vision of “domestic” consumption did not attract a large number of American citizens.

In fact, the ambivalence towards non-consumption of British goods, combined with the popular embrace of smuggling and the continued interest in British fashions points to the fact that by the War of 1812, Americans had come to believe that it was not their responsibility to fight their nation’s battles by abstaining as consumers or even regulating their consumption to such an extent. In instituting a policy of commercial restrictions, Jefferson, Madison and other Republicans had assumed that consumers would co-operate. But that assumption was wrong. By the end of the war it seemed clear that Americans of all sorts had chosen to jettison the practice of non-consumption and domestic consumption even though it was called for in the name of civic duty.

Instead, between 1806 and 1815 a different understanding of the citizen consumer seemed to take shape in political discourse, one that would have a lasting effect on the ways in which Americans imagined consumers and their civic duty. This vision drew on the simple realization that the duties which the government collected on all imported goods were ultimately paid for by the American consumers who purchased these items by the boatload. These revenues were a crucial source of income in 1806. Between 1801 and 1806 nearly all public revenues were derived from customs, resulting in an income that ranged from \$11 to \$13 million annually.¹¹³ This fund was certainly necessary. In 1806,

¹¹³ Donald H. Kagin “Monetary Aspects of the Treasury Notes of the War of 1812,” *Journal of Economic History*, 44, (March, 1984): 70. Additional government revenues were supplied by loans, the largest of

in his State of the Union address, Jefferson informed Americans that as well as paying down the existing debt, the government was also paying for the Louisiana Purchase and for the construction of a new frigate – a cost that had come after the destruction of the *Philadelphia* at Tripoli in 1804.¹¹⁴

Yet Jefferson was also hopeful that the time was coming when the entire public debt might be discharged. When that happened, he believed that the people should still permit the government to raise revenues through a tax on luxury goods, so that public projects could continue to be funded. Jefferson's description revealed a new role for wealthy consumers. Laying out his vision he agreed that "[o]n a few articles of more general and necessary use, the suppression in due season will doubtless be right." However, he continued that "the great mass of the articles on which impost is paid is foreign luxuries, purchased by those only who are rich enough to afford themselves the use of them. Their patriotism would certainly prefer its continuance and application to the great purposes of the public education, roads, rivers, canals, and such other objects of public improvement."¹¹⁵ His speech suggested that a tax on the consumption of foreign goods was the best way to raise money for America's public projects. His enthusiasm was in part rooted in the belief that this kind of consumption was a choice. Americans could choose to spend their money on these luxuries and no one who could not afford it would be forced to pay a tax. It was in many ways an effort to lay a progressive tax on a nation that had proved to be remarkably averse to any form of taxation. Jefferson's vision for raising public funds through the consumption of imported goods would have

which were obtained from Holland in 1792 with smaller bridging loans coming from prominent capitalists or one of the four existing private banks in the United States.

¹¹⁴ Thomas Jefferson, *Sixth Annual Message*, Dec. 2, 1806, www.millercenter.org/scripps/archive/speeches [accessed Jan. 19, 2009.]

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

infuriated Federalist merchants. However, Jefferson did not see this, or non-importation, as an intrinsic attack on commerce. He believed that his acts were ultimately an effort to protect American commerce, which as some politicians were quick to point out, was the source of American wealth. As commerce facilitated nearly all consumption, Jefferson imagined that the taxation of luxury consumption was the best way to raise money for the nation.

Similarly, in an effort to support the Non-Importation Act in congressional debate in March of 1806, Nathan Williams of New York made an impassioned plea for the centrality of consumer funded revenues. “Commerce...presents a mode of fiscal exaction, the most in unison with the spirit and feelings as well as the interests of the American people, that is indirect taxation. By this mode the consumers of articles of foreign growth and manufactures, contribute freely and copiously to that fund which is destined to the payment of the national debt and this too without feeling in a great degree the weight of the contribution.”¹¹⁶ Williams was so eager to prove that this form of generating revenue was correct that he even went as far as to argue that no other way of producing public income was “congenial with the spirit of freedom.”¹¹⁷ In essence Williams found himself arguing that the taxation of imported consumer goods was truly American.

Not every one agreed that the consumer should fund the majority of the public debt. Arguing against the Non-Importation Act in March 1806, war hawk John Randolph lashed out against the merchants who were hoping to protect their carrying trade. Unlike Williams, Randolph objected to the Non-Importation Act because it forced the burden of revenue onto the consumer. Accusing the merchants of avoiding their obligation to the

¹¹⁶ *Commercial Advertiser* (New York, NY), March 28, 1806.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

nation, he described how merchants engaged in the carrying trade allowed “the planter, the farmer and the real American” to shoulder the burden of paying the revenue through their consumption while the merchants avoided these costs by claiming drawbacks or better still passing the cost onto the consumer in the form of inflated prices.¹¹⁸ Violently opposed to the carrying-trade, Randolph was an old fashioned Republican who was suspicious of any government interference in the American economy and would rather go to war than allow America to become mired in commercial restrictions such as the less aggressive Non-Importation Act.¹¹⁹ Yet despite the stark disagreement with Williams, it is notable that both men agreed that America required a revenue source and the consumer, for better or worse, supplied that need.

The passage of the Non-Importation Act, and then the Embargo soon meant that the question of revenues became more pressing than ever. At the end of 1806, revenues had been \$15 million. By 1811 that figure stood at \$13.3 million and by 1812 it was down still further to \$9 million. In the same year, Gallatin noted that federal expenditures were up to \$22 million.¹²⁰ Given the Republican policy of exacting retribution by restricting trade, the question of consumer generated revenue slid out of public view and was eclipsed by Gallatin’s decision after 1812 to issue Treasury notes to fund the war and use bridging loans to finance the country.¹²¹ Nonetheless, the idea of a citizen whose consumption of imported goods funded the country through the mechanism of the tariff

¹¹⁸ *Commercial Advertiser* (New York, NY), March 31, 1806. Drawbacks were commercial refunds on duties paid that merchants could claim under certain circumstances, for example if they re-exported goods they had themselves imported, a transaction that was common with merchants involved in the carrying trade.

¹¹⁹ John F. Devanny Jr., “‘A Loathing of Public Debt, Taxes and Excise:’ The Political Economy of John Randolph of Roanoke,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 109, no. 4 (2001): 400-402.

¹²⁰ Figure for 1806 comes from Thomas Jefferson, *Sixth Annual Message*, Dec. 2, 1806. The other figures come from Kagin, “Treasury Notes,” 71.

¹²¹ Kagin, “Treasury Notes,” 71.

never really disappeared. Perhaps its persistence can be attributed to the fact that some Americans, John Randolph included, believed that in comparison to non-consumption, raising revenue through the taxation of foreign consumer goods was a policy better suited to America's status as a sovereign nation. Answering Nathaniel Macon in a congressional debate in 1809, Randolph made a heartfelt case for ending non-importation for good.

I wish to ask my friend from North Carolina and other gentleman who hear me, if the course to be pursued by us, a free sovereign and independent nation, for the purpose of coercing all the rest of the world is that which it became the colonies to take in order to coerce the *mother country, possessing the monopoly of their commerce*... What is [now] our condition? Entirely altered. We have now to fulfil [sic] the engagements we have made – to pay the price of our independence... we might then do without revenue, because we had not the purposes to which revenue might necessarily be applied... I confess for one that I was mortified at seeing the proceedings of the first continental congress resorted to, to justify the proceedings of an independent America.¹²²

Randolph's bitter sense of frustration suggested that he found the Non-Importation Act to be a humiliating policy for an independent nation. Not only did it acknowledge the persistence of an imperial political economy of dependence, it also suggested that America did not have the power or sophistication to move beyond old colonial bargaining techniques. Randolph also worried that by depriving the public purse of its prime source of revenue, the government would soon have to resort to direct taxation, that very form of governmental burden that Americans had found so objectionable during the Revolution and a policy that Randolph believed to be un-American.¹²³ In other words, Jefferson's vision of a marketplace of retribution was a regression to colonial indignities.

Randolph urged Congress to move beyond that vision of political economy. He hoped that once war had restored the freedom of the seas, Congress could impose a

¹²² "Congress, House of Representatives. Debates on Foreign Relations," *United States Gazette*, Feb. 16, 1809. [Emphasis in text.]

¹²³ *United States Gazette*, Feb. 17, 1809

“modest ad valorem” duty and thus draw upon the country’s consumers to fund the building of the nation, aiding its progression during times of peace and protecting its shores during times of war.¹²⁴ Critics, like Duane, scoffed at the idea that America *needed* to import foreign luxuries in order to remain solvent. But even satirical criticism could not deny that imported goods fetched revenues in the millions.¹²⁵ Indeed by the war’s end, the drastic failures of the restrictive system were evident. The federal government had deprived itself of much needed customs revenue and had been forced to stand by and watch as smugglers of all stripes had continued to bring new British goods into the country.¹²⁶ The restrictionist vision of the consumer had also proven to be outdated. Americans had refused to bow to the demands of their government, continuing to demand and consume British goods both legally and illegally.

But if the Revolutionary vision of the citizen consumer had been altered by the exigencies of postcolonial warfare, the idea that citizens had obligations to the nation had certainly not vanished. While the idea of consumer restraint in the name of civic duty was undergoing an alteration, the concept that a consumer had a part to play in strengthening the nation was slowly gaining more ground. In Randolph’s diatribe and Gallatin’s policy were the seeds of the idea that American consumers of foreign luxury goods would fund the nation through their consumption. As such, the War of 1812 was in many ways a turning point for the idea of the consumer in American political ideology. In the years leading up to the conflict politicians had overlooked the consumer, complacently assuming that consumers would be faithful citizens and would simply comply with whatever restrictions the government put in place. But consumers objected to that casual

¹²⁴ Devanny, “A Loathing of Public Debt,” 400.

¹²⁵ “Depreciation of British Money, No. VIII,” *Aurora*, Feb. 8, 1810.

¹²⁶ Hickey, “Trade Restrictions During the War of 1812,” 538.

dismissal of their desires. They refused to consent to Jefferson's policy and their actions supported the merchants and smugglers who directly contravened the law. Thus by 1815, it seemed clear that politicians would have to ignore the consumer at their peril. Although the consumer remained a nebulous figure, hardly a constituency in their own right, still consumers had become a group who could potentially wield new power in the American nation.

Chapter Three

“The Right to Purchase is as Free as the Right to Sell”: The Auction-House Controversies, 1817-1832.

In 1817, one anonymous defender of New York auction houses made a statement that had unexpected consequences for the fate of the American consumer. Eager to deflect the criticisms of jealous and indebted merchants, this champion of the auction house claimed that “the right to purchase [wa]s as free as the right to sell” and merchants who attacked the auction did so because it forced them to compete for the consumer’s attention and coin. The statement was an accurate assessment of mercantile interest and easily recognized as part of the struggle between east coast merchants and auctioneers for market share; a struggle that endured over twelve years. However, the apparently simple defense of the “right to purchase” was not as straightforward. In ways that surprised everyone involved, the rights and responsibilities of the consumer became a lightning rod

in this self-interested tussle, galvanizing political opinion on all sides. The auctioneers' defense forced Americans in the early republic to consider whether the "right to purchase" was really part of the spectrum of rights that citizens were entitled to claim. Although the retort was in part simply a rhetorical flourish, beneath that lay something more. Embedded in the phrase was a signal that Americans were beginning to consider the civic entitlements and obligations of consumers more broadly, as part of an effort to define more precisely the place and nature of the consumer in the early republic. Inadvertently, the self-interested merchants and auctioneers transformed the commercial turf war into a debate over the complex relationship between consumption and citizenship in the early republic. As this quarrel gained momentum, between 1817 and 1829, it was not only what rights or obligations a consumer had as a citizen that was cause for contention, but also *who* would have the power to define the consumer's civic privileges and duties that provoked a struggle with far reaching consequences.¹

Although the conflicts that erupted around the auction houses of New York and Philadelphia have hardly been studied by scholars, they present a particularly valuable lens for exploring the protean, sometimes prosaic ways in which Americans imagined the connections between their consumption and their civic lives. As a quarrel that persisted over a decade it presents an opportunity to trace the ways the debate over civic consumption evolved; growing out of broader concerns that connected market practice and production to civic values. The conflict also highlights the fact that the relationship between consumption and citizenship was emerging from competing visions of both the economy and the body politic that were neither fully liberal or republican in their nature

¹ *The Beneficial Tendency of Auctioneering and the Danger of Restraining It by a Friend to Trade* (New York: J. H. Sherman, 1817), 14.

but an uneasy amalgam of the two. By the 1830s this struggle over auctions bequeathed a complex legacy of values and behavior to urban consumers in New York and Philadelphia, who had gained not only a new understanding of their identity but a renewed sense of the role they would play within the nation itself. Explaining the context and the course of this little known conflict, this chapter traces the ways in which fresh conceptions of civic consumption took shape and were made meaningful over the course of the 1820s.

Amidst the rapidly changing political economy of the early nineteenth century, the question of what constituted a good American consumer became a politically charged question, albeit a confused one, that would perplex both the auctioneers and merchants involved in the auction conflicts. In the first decades of the new century, multiple competing visions of the American consumer had already emerged. While Republicans championed an agrarian consumer who barely needed or wanted the goods from the transatlantic marketplace, the Federalists jealously guarded a vision of a refined elite consumer, whose access to the material worlds of Europe was to be cherished and protected. At the same time, beyond the halls of power, well-off urban consumers had grappled on a more daily basis with the problems of navigating an expanding consumer marketplace. The conflict with Britain did not really vindicate any of these ideals and instead added a new problem to the many that already existed. Americans who criticized the nation's consumption of foreign commodities were left wondering in the wake of the War of 1812 if they ought to be admonishing the commercial consumers (the merchants who bought the imported goods from English manufacturers) or the ultimate consumers

(the men and women who bought tea and silks from their local retailer.) No one knew who ought to take on the final responsibility of consuming for the good of the nation. This confusion over identity and responsibility was heightened in part by the shifting imperatives of a growing transatlantic marketplace as well as the unsettling experiences of the War of 1812. The resulting uncertainty over the place of consumption left many questions about the shape of the national economy unanswered. By 1815, new economic opportunities and a changing commercial structure caused the identity of the commercial consumer and the ultimate consumer of goods to blur, leaving the role the consumer must play as a citizen open to question.²

The combined pressures of practical and theoretical considerations, touched off by a jealous quarrel over auction regulation, caused the east coast commercial community to explode into acrimonious debate in the wake of the War of 1812. Although the protracted struggle over the place of the auction in American commercial life had not begun as a debate on the civic role of the American consumer, it soon became precisely that. As merchants and auctioneers each attempted to promote their own vision of how to regulate the auction house, they struggled to find a rationale that would convince both a political constituency and a wider public audience of their legitimacy. While neither side began with the intention of championing a consumer's rights or setting out their obligations, auctioneers and merchants quickly saw the value of using the consumer as a symbol to further their own ends. What neither side had anticipated was that a focus on the consumer and their rights meant accepting and dealing with the behavior and expectations of ordinary individual consumers. It was this reality that in the end not only

² Jerry Z. Muller, *The Mind and the Market: Capitalism in Modern European Thought* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 76-81. On the War of 1812 see Donald R. Hickey, "American Trade Restrictions during the War of 1812," *The Journal of American History* 68 (Dec. 1981): 527-538.

altered what both groups hoped to change in terms of regulating the auction but more importantly, changed how members of America's commercial community understood the consumer as a citizen.

Auctions had always generated a certain amount of controversy in American society. As the vehicles that sheriffs used to sell debtors' personal goods to pay creditors, auctions were uncomfortable reminders of the harsh realities of economic life. Moreover, as Benjamin Franklin argued in *The Way to Wealth*, auctioneers were well known for whipping up individuals into a buying frenzy, persuading them to spend unwisely. Franklin's widely circulated condemnation of the auction suggests that "the public vendue" generated a good deal of public discomfort over market morality in colonial towns and cities. By the late eighteenth century, shifting commercial structures also created contention as auctions became indispensable to wholesalers as outlets for imported dry goods. The change was not welcomed by local retailers, who often found themselves at a disadvantage in the frenzied salerooms. Returning home with poor quality goods provoked a great deal of frustration from retailers, prompting several local protests against the auction house. In 1770 for example, disgruntled Philadelphia shopkeepers had instituted a partial boycott of the city's auction houses to try and curtail the sale of dry goods at auction which met with little success. Despite this failure, auctions were regulated by the state and auctioneers had to be licensed by local government. Stipulations ranged from paying special taxes to the prohibition of sales after sunset. In short, the auction had always been a market mechanism that generated

intense interest and suspicion simultaneously. It was unsurprising then, that as a result of the War of 1812 this watchful tolerance became something more fully antagonistic.³

At the outbreak of war, merchants and auctioneers alike had looked on with dismay as the nation ground to a virtual commercial standstill. Three years later, east coast merchants welcomed the resumption of trade with relief, believing that they could pick up business where they had left off. Unfortunately for them, these men had radically miscalculated the ways in which the war had changed the marketplace. British manufacturers, whose warehouses were overflowing with the unsold goods of three long years, inundated the American marketplace with their merchandise. Despite saturating the market by 1816, British manufacturers continued to pour their china ware, textiles and hardware into the United States through the following year. As orders from the U.S. began to dwindle, the impatient manufacturers, frustrated with the cumbersome apparatus of transatlantic trade, sent their own agents to seek new outlets. These agents found American auctioneers, who quickly made the most of their new opportunity.⁴

The auctioneers' unexpected success hinged on their ability to outpace and outsell the merchants in a saturated marketplace. This was not so much an issue of skill as

³ On auctions in the colonial period see Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in Revolt: Urban Life in America, 1743-1776* (New York: Knopf, 1955), 78-79, 276. After 1815 see R.G. Albion, *The Rise of New York Port* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1939), 13, 61, 276-280; Norman Sydney Buck, *The Development of the Organization of Anglo-American Trade 1800-1850* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 135-139; Ira Cohen, "The Auction System in the Port of New York, 1817-1837," *Business History Review* 45 (Winter, 1971): 489-493; Ray Westerfield, "The Early History of American Auctions – A Chapter in Commercial History," *Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences* 23 (May 1920): 159-210; Roland Arkell and Catherine Saunders-Watson, *The Vendue Masters. Tales from Within the Walls of America's Oldest Auction House* (Pottstown, PA: Antique Collectors Club, 2005), 27 and Wendy Woloson, "In Hock. Pawning in Early America" *Journal of the Early Republic* 27 (Spring 2007): 38. On Franklin's critique of auctions see Benjamin Franklin, *The Way to Wealth*, (Montpelier, VT: Printed for Josiah Parks at the Press of Walton & Gross, 1810), 15-16. For more on the incredible persistence and popularity of Franklin's *The Way to Wealth* which was first published in 1758, see James Green and Peter Stallybrass, *Benjamin Franklin: Writer and Printer*, (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 2006).

⁴ For a look at the kind of goods that sold at auction, although for a slightly later period, see "Returns 1825-1831," Auction Records, 1818-1839, New-York Historical Society, New York, (hereafter N-YHS).

commercial structure. While merchants offered their clients long lines of credit, allowing their country customers to stock up and pay up to a year later, auctioneers had always insisted on cash or provided only short lines of credit. As a result they were not only able to stay solvent more easily, but could refurbish their stock more often than their mercantile counterparts. Unsurprisingly, the auctioneer's willingness to buy for cash was a quality that attracted British manufacturers. Over time, British interest matured into outright preference, a shift which enabled auctioneers to sell only the newest and most fashionable items. The auctioneers capitalized on their fashionable reputation by combining it with the ability to sell at comparatively low prices. The insistence upon cash payments allowed auctioneers to shave off the added cost of interest from their prices. Auctioneers also kept prices low through less legal means. In collusion with British manufacturers, auctioneers would often create two invoices; one for their own records and one for the custom's office. Making sure the latter was considerably lower, auctioneers were also able to deduct a percentage of the cost of duty from their prices.⁵

By 1817, the auction house had become a center of commercial energy that drew both old hands and newcomers to the city into its orbit. One young man, arriving in New York in 1821, tried to describe the irresistible pull of these sales. "As one goes further down towards the shore on Pearl Street, Water Street and Front Street," he wrote, "the crowding of merchants becomes greater and the noise more diversified and grating; one person stands on a cask calling off by auction hogsheads of tobacco; another from the Tontine Coffee House is selling some thousand acres of land to the highest bidder; a third at the corner of the street is knocking off a ship or bales of cotton with the hammer." In awe, this youth watched the salesmen. If the trader "pushes his body in a store to learn

⁵ Buck, *The Development of the Organization of Anglo-American Trade*, 142-143.

what is going on,” noted the bewildered young man, “he gets wedged fast into the corner and overshadowed by leghorn hats which cover him like so many umbrellas.” Probably crushed and buffeted himself, this visitor, like many other New Yorkers, was still excited about the sheer thrill of the auction and the opportunities it offered to men of commerce. By 1817, merchants in New York began to claim that auctioneers had the “whole trade of the city” firmly in their hands. Their self-interested protests were only a partial exaggeration: one historian has calculated that as of 1821, 44 percent of all imports into New York were sold at auction.⁶

The bitter rivalry that sprung up between the auctioneers and the merchants of the two port cities in the 1810s was absolutely commercial in nature. Ironically, very little divided the two groups of men and in fact most of New York’s and Philadelphia’s auctioneers had at one time or another been merchants themselves. Consequently, auctioneers not only competed for market share but also muscled in on much of the merchant’s social capital, undoubtedly considering themselves members of the mercantile classes. New York auctioneer Charles Town, for example, was not only a director of the North River Bank along with Peter Jay – son of the wealthy merchant John Jay - in 1836 but was also the President of the Aetna Fire Insurance Company, which had a capital of \$200,000. Others, like Martin Hoffman, belonged to old mercantile families that were just as at home in the precincts of the Tontine Coffee House as the most well established merchant. Some, such as Frederick Montmollin and Robert McMenomy married into eminent families that brought them social standing and access to new wealth. Montmollin, for example, married Hannah Phile, the daughter of a prominent

⁶ Diaries 1821-1824, Summer 1821, (N-YHS); Buck, *The Development of the Organization of Anglo-American Trade*, 139; Cohen, “The Auction System in the Port of New York,” 496.

Philadelphia physician and landowner while McMenemy married Elizabeth Salter, the daughter of Manasseh Salter, a wealthy New York merchant who undoubtedly helped him to establish himself by giving him a position as a clerk in his store. Many auctioneers had also served in the Revolutionary War and some, like Mordecai Myers had attained officer status that set them up later for political careers. Myers, like several other prominent auctioneers, was also Jewish, but this was not a dominant characteristic of New York and Philadelphia auctioneers. Instead, these men came from all walks of life and used auctioneering to either make or augment a family fortune. After 1815 in particular, when times were hard, merchants believed that those fortunes cut into the profits they believed to be rightfully their own.⁷

Nonetheless, this commercial rivalry might have continued to simmer beneath the surface had it not been for a decision by a small group of merchants to publicly denounce auctions in the winter of 1817. In part, their efforts were simply a jealous response to the success of men like Philadelphia based auctioneer, Silas Weir. Weir's own correspondence for the post war period attests to just how busy auction houses had been in the two years following the conflict. Weir had done well with British cassimeres,

⁷ For a list of New York auctioneers see "Appointments by the Council of Appointment March 4th 1817" *Albany Advertiser*, Mar. 8, 1817. For Philadelphia's auctioneers I constructed a list of names by surveying the adverts from *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser* for 1816 and cross checking with James Robinson *Philadelphia Directory for 1816 containing the Names, Trades, and Residences of the Inhabitants of the City, Southwark, Northern Liberties and Kensington* (Philadelphia: Printed for the Publisher, 1816). On Charles Town see Edwin Williams, *The New-York Annual Register*, (New York: J. Leavitt, 1835) 205, 235; on Martin Hoffman see Walter Barrett, *The Old Merchants of New York City Second Series*, (New York: Carleton, 1864), 53-55; on Frederick Montmollin see *Genealogies of Pennsylvania Families from the Pennsylvania Genealogical Museum* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1982) 3:491 www.ancestry.com [accessed Oct. 23, 2008]; for Robert McMenemy see John Edwin Stillwell, *First Families of Old Monmouth* (Washington D.C.: R. Beresford, 1882), 4-6 and on Mordecai Myers see "Political Reminiscences: Two Chapters from the Recollections of a Political Journalist," *New York Times*, May 20, 1866. Other Jewish auctioneers included Simon Nathan of New York for more see www.jewishencyclopedia.com [accessed July 14, 2008] and Solomon Seixas of New York whose career is noted in Woloson, "In Hock," 40, 50.

calicos and cambrics, Irish linens and had even been sought out to sell American manufactured printed table covers, woolen shawls and fine flannels from his commission rooms on South Front Street. But it was not this kind of success alone that prompted the merchants to act. Rather, it was the news in December 1817 that Congress was debating whether to repeal the 2 percent tax on all sales at auction, a wartime tax which the politicians now believed was no longer justified. The threat of repeal proved to be the last straw for the struggling merchants who finally chose to publicly condemn the system of sale by auction. Not long after, news filtered through to Weir that was far from welcome. As three of Weir's New York colleagues informed him, a group of merchants and traders had organized to pressure Congress to pass a new tax bill, calling for a 10 percent duty, one that would cripple the business of auctioneers. Anxious to circumvent this disaster, the New York auctioneers begged for Weir's cooperation, asking him to join with them to thwart the efforts of the "dangerous combination." Weir, eager to protect his own interests, agreed, thus joining with a range of other auctioneers from Boston to Baltimore who hoped to put an end to the merchants' attacks.⁸

The auctioneers' decision to form an inter-regional combination was a sensible one. From the very first, the question of whether auctions ought to be taxed captured national attention. Despite the fact that a great deal of the conflict centered in New York, nearly every major east coast city newspaper published a story noting the ongoing

⁸ Martin Hoffman, Philip Stone and Daniel Dedham to Silas E. Weir, Dec. 19, 1817, Mrs. Howard W. Lewis Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, (hereafter cited as Lewis Collection, HSP); on Weir's business see, Aaron Levy Jr. to Weir, Aug. 17, 1814, Lewis Collection, HSP; Moses Poor to Weir, Aug. 24, 1814, Lewis Collection, HSP; Thomas Didery to Weir, May 16, 1816, Lewis Collection, HSP; James Gillespie to Weir, Jun. 20, 1816, Lewis Collection, HSP; R&G Gould to Weir, Feb. 12, 1817, Lewis Collection, HSP. Weir was listed at this address in James Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1810 Containing the Names, Trades and Residence of the Inhabitants of the City, Southwark and Northern Liberties* (Philadelphia: Printed for the Publisher, 1810). On the abolition of duties on auction sales see *The Public Statutes at Large of the United States of America*, ed. Richard Peters (18 vols., Boston: Little Brown, 1845), 3: 401-403.

congressional debate over the taxation of auctions, pointing to the fact that the issue went beyond local commercial rivalry and spoke to a larger ongoing debate over how the country's economy ought to serve the nation. As such the auctioneers quickly realized the fight was going to be waged on an open stage. "Our apprehensions are alive to every movement of theirs publically [sic]," wrote New York auctioneer Martin Hoffman, to Silas Weir, "but we are by no means acquainted with their secret machinations." Hoffman was clearly being pragmatic. There was little chance of discovering what the merchants were doing to undermine auctions privately. Hoffman seemed more concerned about the open pamphlet that the merchants had published. In it, merchants attacked auctions as a violent, unnatural and destructive mode of business, arguing that "every sober and correct judge of business, must perceive nothing in prospect but confusion, desperation and ruin," if auctions were not checked. The angry merchants argued that auctioneers not only undersold hardworking American merchants – which divorced commodities from their natural and ostensibly stable value – but also served English interests before their own nation's. The merchants' pamphlet revealed a group of men horrified by the ways in which the logic of supply and demand could overtake their own interest. But beyond self-interest, their language suggests their shock that the steady flow of commodities regulated by need that they usually oversaw could be disrupted by the tidal wave of goods that the auctioneers had brought into the nation to cater to the country's sudden and disproportionate appetite for new things. Unable to compete with the auctioneer's entrepreneurial abilities, the merchants found themselves cut out of a marketplace where old business relationships were supplanted by commercial opportunism. As a result the merchants complained bitterly that the auctions created a

marketplace that did not serve the country's best interests and was thus unnatural. These were serious accusations and they would now be judged on a public and national stage. In the long term, this meant that the debate became something more than a spat over profit. By the very force of its public and political nature, the discussion became a means to critique the successes and failures of American political economy and the citizens it helped create.⁹

The anti-auction arguments in 1817 failed to convince Congress, perhaps because the auctioneers were so swift to repudiate the merchants' claims. Weir himself wrote to Adam Seybert, the Republican Congressman from Pennsylvania who sat on the Committee on Commerce and Manufacturers. Other auctioneers also fought hard to prove they operated a "fair & most useful trade for public good & public convenience," a phrase used to counteract the merchants' accusations that their business was selfish and opportunistic. It was also a reply that suggests that not even the auctioneers were comfortable with the idea of sacrificing the balance of interests and the public welfare to the imperatives of the market. In fact, New York auctioneers responded particularly effectively by answering the merchants' attacks with a pamphlet of their own, one that ridiculed the traders as self-interested and hysterical. How could it be, the auctioneers asked, that thirty-six men, the only licensed auctioneers in New York, could bring the greatest commercial entrepôt of the west to financial ruin? It was a strong case. It was made stronger because each state benefited individually from sales at auction, raking in

⁹ Martin Hoffman, Philip Stone and Daniel Denham to Weir, Dec. 29, 1817, Lewis Collection, HSP; *Auctions Inconsistent with Regular Trade and Injurious to the City. Addressed to the People of New York* (New York: Van Winkle, Wiley & Co., 1817), 5. For national coverage of the debate see *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.), Dec. 12, 1817; *Alexandria Gazette* Dec. 12, 1817; *Commercial Advertiser* (New York), Dec. 13, 1817; *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), Dec. 13, 1817; *Washington Whig* (Bridgetown, NJ), Dec. 15, 1817; *Boston Daily Adviser*, Dec. 16, 1817.

funds from duties, bonds paid and licensing fees. Few Congressmen wanted to be responsible for depriving their state coffers of such monies. Despite the merchants' best efforts, the repeal of the federal taxation of sales at auction became law in January 1818 and the discussion of a 10 percent tax on auctions never even materialized. The auctioneers breathed a sigh of relief.¹⁰

This skirmish proved to be the opening act in what would be a more than ten year debate over the place of the auction in American commercial life. No one involved in this conflict had any illusions. The battle over auction houses was motivated by self-interest on all sides. The huge sums that auctioneers paid to the state in taxes suggests the scale of their business. In 1822, Philadelphia auctioneers paid \$70,491.00 to the state of Pennsylvania; by 1826, that sum had more than doubled to \$142,929.00. In New York a similar leap took place. In 1818, New York auctioneers had added \$105,000.00 to the state coffers and eight years later, that sum stood at \$285,845.00. These figures confirmed the merchants' belief that they were fighting for their livelihoods, while auctioneers were fighting to hang on to prosperous profit margins.¹¹

With so much at stake, both sides chose their positions very carefully. Thus it is important to note that in the early stages of the debate, merchants seemed to care very little for the consumer. In fact, their main objection was that the auction, as a "fashionable machine of polite and licensed swindling" was a *system* that methodically undermined regular trade. Of course, they were happy to lodge specific complaints and

¹⁰ The quote comes from Hoffman's letter to Weir, see Martin Hoffman, Philip Stone, Daniel Dedham to Weir, Dec. 19, 1817, Lewis Collection, HSP; Adam Seybert to Weir, Dec. 29, 1817, Lewis Collection, HSP. See also *The Beneficial Tendency of Auctioneering*, 5. For the funds that auctions brought the state see Cohen, "The Auction System in the Port of New York," 493. Cohen notes that the Auction Law provided DeWitt Clinton with \$1,247,319.21 which Clinton used to construct the Erie Canal.

¹¹ For Philadelphia figures see *The Saturday Evening Post* (Philadelphia), Aug. 2, 1823; and *The Register of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia), Jan. 19, 1828. For New York City figures see *Niles Weekly Register*, (Baltimore), Mar. 7, 1818, and *Western Recorder* (Utica), Feb. 14, 1826.

did. They protested that they were unfairly undersold, that the quality of goods sold at auction was inferior and worst of all that auctioneers deliberately evaded legitimate legal expenses. Yet in spite of this litany, they did not argue that a better class of auctioneer would solve the problem. On the contrary, it was the very nature of the auction as business practice that became the merchants' chief target. Their first concern was that the auction encouraged speculation, duplicity and downright immorality, chiefly from America's commercial citizens. Painting a bleak and hopeless picture, anxious merchants declared that "when a nation sinks down from the habits of order, the rules of morality and the dictates of religion, they never rise again." But the merchants' concern did not end with the immorality of individuals. At the heart of their objections lay the claim that over time, auctions would destroy the business of all merchants, decimating the commercial interest and fundamentally disrupting the balance of interests in America. Regulating the auction was not simply about preventing individual misdeeds. The merchants believed that unless Americans strictly controlled the economy to ensure that every interest, commercial or otherwise, was equally served, the nation would not hold together.¹²

It is not surprising then that auctioneers under attack in 1817 defended their trade by claiming that it served "the public good and public convenience." To auctioneers, who had operated so long in the shadow of merchant monopolies, the mercantile hysteria must have appeared somewhat self-serving. By their lights, the auction served to re-balance American political economy, by stopping the merchants from dominating transatlantic

¹² *Auctions Inconsistent with Regular Trade* (New York, 1817), 4, 6. The debate over holding the union together through economic regulation has its roots in the constitutional convention of 1787. See Cathy D. Matson and Peter S. Onuf, *A Union of Interests. Political and Economic Thought in Revolutionary America* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1990) and Drew McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

trade. For both sides, the question of what constituted a balanced marketplace was clearly at stake. Moreover, because of the connections Americans made between balanced trade and the state of the nation, the question of what constituted a balanced – or equal – nation was also up in the air. The balanced nation was more than a concern over economic harmony. The equal treatment of economic interest acted as the material basis for the creation of a democratic polity in the United States. It prevented the rise of a financial aristocracy and permitted all citizens to remain equal to one another – as befit a republic. Thus when the pro-auction propagandist wrote in defense of his cause, “that the right to purchase is as free as the right to sell,” he was more focused on balancing interests than championing an imagined consumer, because in the final analysis it was the balance of interest that ensured equal citizenship for American men in the early republic.¹³

The preoccupation with creating a perfect union of interests meant that the consumer appeared hardly at all in these early conflicts. Where mentioned, the consumer was a shadowy figure encompassed somewhere within the broad spectrum of agendas that both sides claimed to be advocating for. The consumer’s initial absence from the debate was in part because of choices made in rhetorical strategy. Yet it was also because the “ultimate consumer,” the individual who ended up buying, keeping and using the goods sold, was not in fact present at auction houses in the late 1810s. Instead the auctions attracted city retailers, country store owners and perhaps the odd peddler, all those who had previously bought from the urban merchants. It was these retailers who flocked to the auction house, buying up all the cheap goods on offer and then selling

¹³ Quote comes from Martin Hoffman, Philip Stone, Daniel Dedham to Weir, Dec. 19, 1817, Lewis Collection, HSP. For the auctioneers’ accusations that merchants monopolized trade see *The Beneficial Tendency of Auctioneering*, 12-14. However, anxieties over the question of monopoly surfaced on both sides of the debate. See Joshua R. Greenberg, *Advocating the Man* (2006), <http://www.gutenberg.org/greenberg/Chapter3JRG.html> 5-10.

them on to urban and rural consumers across the east coast. In 1817, focused on the loss of their business, merchants did not think to raise the question of the consumer.

Auctioneers, who rarely came into contact with the individuals who bought the set of Staffordshire crockery or selected winter weight fabrics at the dry goods store, had inadvertently acknowledged the consumer in their self-defense, but had not planned to champion the shopper's rights. Nonetheless, the phrase "right to purchase" seemed to strike a chord. By 1820, when auctions once again came under the spotlight, the consumer, though loosely defined, had a new place in the debate.¹⁴

A second round of public debate over auctions came as a result of the economic devastation caused by the Panic of 1819. In the immediate aftermath of the crash, the commercial auctions of New York did not garner much attention. Instead it was the old specter of the sheriff's sale, the auction at which the bankrupts' goods were sold off, that imprinted itself on the public. As visible reminders of the reality of debt and bankruptcy, auctions seemed to encapsulate the horrors of an unstable economy [Fig. 3.1]. More broadly, the panic caused Americans to doubt that "unfettered freedom of exchange would bring prosperity and rough equality of opportunity." These misgivings translated into vicious debates over how best to regulate the economy and spawned arguments over banks, tariff, specie and bankruptcy laws, as well as of course, the auction itself. By May of 1820 a wave of anti-auction memorials had reached Congress, directed to the

¹⁴ Weir, for example, was employed to find "purchasers for back country consumption." See Josiah Roberts to Lisle, Weir & Co., Feb. 4, 1819, Lewis Collection, HSP. For a discussion on how wholesale and retail business was changing in these years see Michael Zakim, *Ready-Made Democracy: A History of Men's Dress in the American Republic, 1760-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 41-68, Walter A. Friedman, *Birth of a Salesman: The Transformation of Selling in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 14-33; Buck, *The Development of Anglo-American Trade*; and Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia 1800-1850* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 4-29.

Chairman of the Committee of Manufactures, Henry Baldwin from Pennsylvania.

Baldwin, a staunch protectionist, responded by putting together a legislative package that would have placed a 10 percent tax on the sale of foreign goods at auction, dramatically increased tariffs, and ordered that customs duties must be paid in cash.¹⁵

The stringent regulations that Baldwin proposed touched off a flurry of debate in Congress that was oriented around the question of whether regulating the economy would in fact promote the nation's collective interest. The anti-auction contingent argued that the public vendues represented a monopoly since only very few men were licensed and allowed to make money as auctioneers. They also protested that not only did auction sales undermine the business of American merchants and manufacturers by leaving them open to unfair competition, but that these sales also converted trade into "a system of hazard and chance" which induced "gambling and speculating habits." The auctions represented the worst kind of marketplace to these protestors, one which promoted national immorality, unfair privilege and that unchecked would prevent Congress from providing "parental care" to "the sinking American manufacturer and merchant." In contrast, those in favor of the auctions argued directly against regulation, pointing out that to legislate against auctions would only privilege merchants at the expense of manufacturers and farmers. In fact, they argued vociferously that to permit auctions was in fact to undermine the commercial monopoly that merchants maintained on transatlantic trade, a monopoly that allowed them to sell their commodities for unreasonably high prices. Some politicians also pointed out that any taxation of the American people amounted to an attack on American's sacrosanct right of property. Over

¹⁵ Quote from Daniel S. Dupre, "The Panic of 1819 and the Political Economy of Sectionalism" in *The Economy of Early America: Historical Perspectives & New Directions*, ed. Cathy D. Matson, (University Park, PA.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 276.

the course of five days the debate over auctions became a clash of two understandings of the marketplace, out of which emerged a new vision of the consumer.¹⁶

While Baldwin, representing the anti-auction voice claimed that he wanted America and by implication the federal government, to be in “full command of [its] consumption,” his real interest lay in protecting the interests of the merchant and manufacturer. In contrast, his opponents began to experiment with the concept of the consumers’ rights. They suggested that the unregulated marketplace allowed Americans to make economic decisions and choices that as citizens they were entitled to make without interference. Republican James Johnson of Virginia, made this case with particular gusto. He argued that “the old fashioned way was the best [which] left to the good people of the United States to judge for themselves of what would best promote their interest.” Re-iterating that point only a few days later Johnson pointed out that while he conceded the need to tax citizens during a time of war, “in time of peace, he was disposed to let every man tax himself what he pleased by his consumption of articles of foreign growth or manufacture.” Johnson’s argument was not only in support of state’s rights, it was also an endorsement of the individual’s right to make their own economic decisions. Consumers approached the marketplace with full knowledge of the higher cost of foreign goods. Should they decide to buy more expensive goods that was their decision. But Johnson would not countenance the federal government imposing an added obligation in the form of taxation upon the citizens of the United States. As to the charge of immoral and foolish purchasing, Whig Congressman Albert H. Tracy of New York argued that private sales by merchants were just as likely as the public sale at auction to promote immoderate consumption – more likely in fact because people could buy on

¹⁶ Charles Kinsey, *Annals of Congress* 16th Cong., 1st Sess. (1820), 2176; John Sergeant, *Ibid.*, 2175.

credit. The implication of his argument was that regulation of sales was unlikely to alter consumer behavior and as a result it should not be attempted. Although Baldwin finally convinced the House that Johnson and his pro-auction ilk were wrong, his supporters in the Senate did not have the same success. By the end of 1820, auctions remained untaxed at the federal level. However, Johnson's assertions suggest that a new line of argument over the legitimacy of the auction had entered into the debate, one that was slowly starting to imagine the consumer as a political interest and place more emphasis on the individual's right to purchase goods unhindered by the federal government's efforts to regulate the marketplace.¹⁷

In 1821, as pro-merchant groups continued to dwell on the ways in which auctions upset the balance of trade and deprived merchants of their livelihoods, auctioneers began to experiment with a new line of debate. They drew on the idea that regulating consumption broadly was important, but in particular capitalized on the idea of the rights of a consumer in the American marketplace. Looking to highlight how auctions drove down prices for consumers by introducing legitimate competition in the dry goods market, New York auctioneers such as W.W Wetmore and Robert McMenemy accused merchants of trying to levy a "tax upon the yeomanry of the country." The choice of vocabulary was surely deliberate. It signaled the auctioneers' attempts to link their cause to a specific vision of American political economy: one that championed the agricultural interest and supported a self-sufficient farmer that helped render the nation independent

¹⁷ For Baldwin's quote see Malcolm Rogers Eiselen, *The Rise of Pennsylvania Protectionism* (Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, 1974), 54; for Johnson's response see *Annals of Congress*, 16th Cong., 1st Sess., (1820), 2175, 2198. For Tracy's comment see *Annals of Congress*, 16th Cong., 1st Sess., (1820), 2175. For an example of the anti-auction memorials see *The Chamber of Commerce of the City of New York, January 6th 1820* (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1820); *City of New York Praying for Cash Payment of Duties and High Duties on Sales at Auction January 7th 1820* (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1820); for Baldwin's efforts see Eiselen, *The Rise of Pennsylvania Protectionism*, 54 and Westerfield, "Early History of American Auctions," 204.

through his faithful labor on America's "fertile but uncultured soil." The emphasis on the yeoman's production was no accident. These auctioneers were experimenting with new ideas about what a consumer might be entitled to and it surely helped them to couch the figure of the consumer in the familiar terms of a producer's identity whose labor earned him his entitlements. This ensured that their audience would understand that the auctioneers were promoting the cause of hard working male citizens and not dandies or spendthrift women. As the auctioneers pushed at the boundaries of what the individual could expect as a citizen consumer, they used the language of production to anchor their arguments in an older politics of virtue.¹⁸

The figure of the yeoman consumer was in many ways fiction. Auctions were patronized by and large by commercial middle-men; the city or country retailer who bypassed the wholesale dry goods merchants in their quest for a better deal. But the auctioneers seemed to believe that their promotion of the imagined figure of the yeoman consumer would garner extra support for their cause. Thus they cultivated an image of the simple consumer, who preferred the plain and substantial fabrics he bought at auction, rather than the "shewy" and expensive ones that merchants pressed upon rural consumers, corrupting them with luxury. The powerful web of associations that auctioneers sought to weave around the issue of taxation at auction was certainly an invention. Auctioneers were just as capable of selling luxury goods and retailers and consumers knew it. [Fig. 3.2] But their efforts to connect their business to a fight for low

¹⁸ *Memorial of the Auctioneers of the City of New York* (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1821), 11; *The Beneficial Tendency of Auctioneering*, 13. For the anti-auction response that failed to highlight the plight of the consumer see "Sales at Auction" *Niles Weekly Register* July 21, 1821 or *Memorial of the American Society for the Encouragement of Domestic Manufactures January 21, 1822* (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1822).

prices and the anti-monopoly cause was an effort to reach out to a prominent anti-protectionist contingent, both in government and in a wider public audience. By creating an imagined consumer that figured as the lynchpin in a popular fiction of nation and good citizenship, the auctioneers' struck a powerful blow for their cause.¹⁹

The auctioneers' achievement is hard to measure. In part their success in persuading the public that they served a yeoman consumer is reflected in the continuing success of the auction. The total percentage of U.S imports sold at auction rose from 13 percent in 1820 to 16 percent in 1821, reflecting a broad base of support and interest in the auctioneers' business. What is perhaps more striking was the marked failure of a commercial boycott of auctions that merchants in New York attempted to orchestrate in 1821. Attempting to turn public opinion against the auctioneers, a group of merchants called the United Dry Goods Mercantile Association placed an advertisement in the *New-York Gazette*. In the advertisement, merchants recommended to importers that they deliberately advertise their sales as private, giving retailers a chance to avoid the public sales at auction houses. After five months the merchants gathered together in Washington Hall in New York, to discuss the progress of the boycott. Despite the bombastic tone and the slightly desperate agreement that they had struck a symbolic blow, the merchants had to concede that their efforts had done very little to stop the proliferation of auction sales in New York. Perhaps it was this frustration that prompted the merchants to shift their angle of attack on auctions. If they could no longer compete for the consumer's attention in terms of price and variety, they could and did continue to highlight the inherent immorality of the auction sale. As such they began to style themselves as the guardian of

¹⁹ *Memorial of the Auctioneers of the City of New York* (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1821), 8.

the consumers' interests, promising to protect shoppers by exposing the perils of the auction house.²⁰

Proving that auction houses were dens of iniquity was not particularly hard. The auction house already had a reputation as a place which facilitated crooked business practices. Any citizen who browsed the pages of *The New York City Hall Recorder*, would have soon learned of the many accounts of cons and robberies that took place either near the auction house or within its actual walls. Thieves lurked at the back of the crowded auction room, waiting for the buyer to be distracted by the buzz of the sale, before picking his pockets. Burglars frequently used the auction to sell off the stolen goods before they could be detected. The question of the auctioneer's collusion in these illegal activities remained open to question. They were certainly willing to conspire with their suppliers to ensure that they avoided the costs associated with duties and fees. Silas Weir, the Philadelphia auctioneer, received a letter from a colleague in March of 1817 that illustrated just how simple it was to bypass the payment of duty. "Prior to the sale," wrote the vendor, "we wish the Goods advertised as the effects of a Bankrupt (who formerly transacted business in your city.) This will save the State and U States duty." In all likelihood, Weir complied with the request. It was an easy way to save money.²¹

Yet the merchants' real invective was saved for the double dealings that directly harmed the consumer. Despite the auctioneers' claims that they conducted honest sales, it

²⁰ See Cohen, "The Auction System in the Port of New York," 496; on the meeting see "Auction Duties," *Niles Weekly Register*, Oct., 13, 1821; and Westerfield, "Early History of American Auctions," 199.

²¹ W. Laverty to Weir, Mar. 11, 1817, Lewis Collection, HSP. For other instances of customs fraud see Smith M. Call & Co. to Weir, Mar. 22, 1817, Lewis Collection, HSP. On efforts to get around paying duty see William E Ross to William L. Marcy Esq. Mar 25, 1828, Auction Returns, N-YHS.

On auctions as opportunities for crime see "Aiding, Abetting and Assisting," *The New York City Hall Recorder* (Dec. 1819), 179; "John Shotwell's cases," *The New York City Hall Recorder* (June 1818), 95; "Larceny" *The New York City Hall Recorder* (1818), 210; "Article 5" *New-York Weekly Museum*, Dec. 30, 1815, 144.

was clear that they often bypassed legal regulations. Schemes to confuse buyers at auction were rife. Otis Swan, a New York merchant with whom Weir did regular business, concocted an elaborate scheme to try and raise the prices on fabrics he sent to Weir in the summer of 1817. “We have an idea,” wrote Swan, “that these goods will bring more money sold as bombazettes than Wildbores – if they are called Bombazetts & shown out[,] people would see them & judge for themselves - & we think the being called Bombazettes would induce them to give a little more for them than to call them Wildbores.” It was a classic ruse that played on the very nature of sale at auction. Relying on the speed at which sales were conducted, and the retailers’ greedy desire for a bargain, Swan argued that Weir could simply nudge clients to fool themselves into thinking that they were buying fabrics that were worth more than they actually were. Since well informed clients would see through the ploy, it would only be the simpletons who would be deceived.²²

It was this attitude that merchants chose to highlight over the course of the 1820s. In their earlier efforts to promote their own interest, merchants had focused on the systematic and un-American defrauding of the customs house, which deprived the nation of its rightful funds, in order to provoke public fury. By 1822, the auctioneer’s duplicitous lack of concern for the consumers’ rights caused a flurry of outrage. Merchants argued that auctions afforded men the opportunity to sell “spurious and deceptive articles of Merchandise...[and] conceal[ed] from public censure ‘those practicing or attempting to practise [sic] fraud.’” Worse still, merchants pointed out that auction sales had the capacity to “tempt the buyer, who ha[d] been deceived by the

²² On the wildbore scheme see Otis Swan to Weir, Jul. 23 1817, Lewis Collection, HSP. For the idea that the buyer at an auction required experience see *Memorial of the Auctioneers of the City of New York*, 8.

purchase of a spurious instead of a genuine article, to pass the cheat, and deceive another, who in turn shifts to a third, till the cheat goes round and is at last fastened upon the consumer, who is generally the person least able to bear the loss.” Placing the consumer’s plight at the heart of their critiques, merchants struggled to regain the political advantage and the moral imperative they appeared to have lost in 1820 with the failure of Baldwin’s auction bill and the indifferent results of their boycott the following year. Invoking the rich language of rights they argued that the auction system was a monopoly that shattered commercial equality. “In a republican government like ours,” they warned, “great care should be taken that priviledges [sic] calculated to exalt one class of the community at the expense of another, should not be tolerated. Equal rights and priviledges [sic] are secured to all by the Constitution.” From this lofty position they felt they had a winning argument. Not even the auctioneers could refute the claim that their sales defrauded the retailers and sparked a chain of events that eventually led to the innocent country consumer paying the price for the auctioneers cunning and deceit.²³

The merchants’ faith in the strength of their own argument was misplaced. They had formulated an attack that relied on a public agreement that retailers and consumers had a right to be protected from such frauds. But the auctioneers had already anticipated this move. They fully acknowledged that buying at auction came with some risk. They readily conceded that all too often fabrics sold under the hammer might be shorter than advertised: dressed, glazed and decorated in an effort to make them appear richer and more valuable than they actually were. But since auctioneers by law had to offer a warranty on goods sold, most retailers and country store keepers accepted that business at

²³ *An Exposition of Some of the Evils Arising from the Auction System* (New York: Van Pelt and Spear, 1822), 8, 6.

the auction house entailed some risk but that the reward of a low price was worth the occasional poor deal. If some of this cost was transferred onto the consumer, then so be it. As the auctioneers argued, those who did business at auction did so knowing full well what was going on. “The misrepresentation has become sanctioned by universal practice and is innocent because notorious,” claimed the vendue masters. Drawing on a long standing legal understanding of *caveat emptor*, the auctioneers made it clear that they were not responsible for making sure that a country innocent or first time retailer knew the ins and outs of city trade. Their task, as they began to define it, was simply to bring down the price of commodities for the savvy middlemen and retailers who then passed on the benefit to the ultimate consumer.²⁴

The auctioneers’ arguments had taken care of the rights of the retailer. The force of the *caveat emptor* assertion rendered the merchants’ protests about the duplicity of auctioneers futile. If retailers knew the risks and continued to buy at auction, then as the failed boycott of 1821 suggested, there was nothing that merchants could do about it. However, some anti-auction campaigners still believed they could damage the auction through continuing to fight for the right of the ultimate consumer, the figure that auctioneers had framed as the farmer. For several years, auctioneers had claimed that farmers were well served by auctions. But anti-auction campaigners now began to refute that claim. They argued that cheap prices meant nothing, if all that farmers could buy were the shoddy offerings of auctioneers. In a series of letters addressed to the citizens of Baltimore, one anonymous author pointed out that farmers were being offered “quantities

²⁴ *Ibid.* 8. On the history of *caveat emptor* and its implementation in U.S. law in the early republic see Walton H. Hamilton, “The Ancient Maxim of Caveat Emptor,” *The Yale Law Journal*, 40 (Jun. 1931): 1133-1187.

of rubbage [sic] which in reality [were] not worth the expence.” Similarly, a group of Philadelphia merchants complained to Congress in 1824 that “the fact is notorious, that goods are now made expressly for sale by auction, so extremely deficient, that the most heedless consumer, is convinced on trial that he has been defrauded.” Unfortunately for merchants, their outrage was not shared by consumers. Country store owners even tempted shoppers into their stores by advertising that the goods on offer were ones they had bought at auction in New York at “auction prices.”²⁵ [Fig. 3.3]

The merchants’ decision to highlight the poor quality cheap goods was not simply a concern for the innocent consumer. The criticism arose out of a broader anxiety that auctions allowed goods to enter the United States that were designed simply to be sold rather than be of use to anyone, or as one author put it, “made expressly for sale by auction.” It reflected a growing discomfort surrounding individual consumer’s desires and how they reflected on the nation’s economy. Auction critics believed that public sales encouraged people to purchase on an impulse and fulfill capricious desires. Magazine articles commented that it was all too easy to be deceived by the excitement of the sale leaving individuals with purchases they did not want. Indeed, those who bought at auction were known as the “here and there” folks, people who could not settle to anything honest and sustained. Critics contrasted this uncontrolled behavior with the calm, orderly purchases people made at private sales where, they claimed, consumers bought only what was necessary, high quality or useful. By providing rooms full of cheap goods that

²⁵ *The Auction System Being a Series of Numbers Published in the Federal Gazette, Addressed to the Citizens of Baltimore* (Baltimore: John D. Toy, 1824), 31; Samuel Harvey, *Copy of a Letter Addressed to each Member of Congress by the Delegates from the Committee appointed at a meeting of the Merchants of Philadelphia* (United States, 1824), 4. For a sample of advertisements that boast of ‘auction prices’ see Rochester (NY) *Telegraph* Jan. 6, 1824; Ithaca *Journal* Apr. 21, 1824; Rochester (NY) *Telegraph* Nov. 9, 1824, *Ibid.* Apr. 26, 1825. See also Henry H. Chamberlin, *Chamberlin & Co’s. cheap cash store* (Worcester, 1841).

inspired desire but had no use, auctions allowed individuals to surrender to his or her own consumer cravings at the expense of good judgment. As this mistrust matured over the 1820s, critics dwelt on the practiced theatrical skills of a good auctioneer, who could whip a crowd into a frenzy, inducing them to buy goods they had no use for and were poorly made. It was, after all, no coincidence that the auctioneer sold from “the stage.” But the logic of this argument had unexpected consequences. By the late 1820s, critics found themselves unable to blame only the auctioneer for the evils of the system. Merchants had to confront the problem that people kept buying from stores that had got their goods at auction.²⁶

As retailers continued to reel in their customers by promising them goods brought at auction, merchants struggled to prove that “the innocent consumer [wa]s the real sufferer.” Critics could not deny that retailers regularly advertised their new goods successfully by crowing that they had just received new stock by buying from New York auctions. It appeared that even the ultimate consumers of manufactured goods believed that auction sales would provide them with new items at cheaper prices. In fact, merchants were forced to acknowledge that if farmers looked for quality rather than quantity at a cheap price then the problem of poor merchandise and a “vitiated public taste,” would disappear. They hoped that farmers could become better “economists” by learning that their interest would be better served if they stopped buying the cheap but showy fabrics on sale at auction. It was quite a leap from their earliest arguments in

²⁶ Harvey, *Copy of a Letter*, 4. On the debate over sale versus use, see *The Beneficial Tendencies of Auctioneering*, 10 and A Plain Practical Man, *Remarks upon the Auction System to Which Are Added Numerous Illustrations* (New York, 1828), 9,18; “Gone to a Book Auction” *The Ariel* July 10, 1830. For the “here and there” folk see “Here and There Folks” *New-York Weekly Museum* March 8, 1817, 304. See also Zakim, *Ready-Made Democracy*, 17-19, 41-47. For the vaudevillian nature of auctions see A Plain Practical Man, *Remarks upon the Auction System*, 46; “On Metropolitan Auctions” *The Atheneum; or Spirit of the English Magazines*, Mar. 15, 1825, 472.

which they had only demanded that auctions be regulated by government. Now merchants began to demand that consumers themselves take responsibility for the shape and nature of the American marketplace, buying more expensive goods to “employ the American merchant and manufacturer” and to benefit the nation. But after the debates of the earlier years, not to mention the lessons learned during the War of 1812, it was clear that merchants had little faith in their fellow Americans’ ability to regulate themselves. They knew that just like the retailers before them, the ultimate consumers seemed happy to embrace a marketplace of uncertainty with the promise of a bargain always hovering around the corner. Finally, merchants had to face the fact that consumers themselves believed they had a “right to purchase” whatever they wanted and that efforts to control auctions had to start with the consumers themselves.²⁷

Charging the ultimate consumer with the task of regulating the auctions was hardly effective. By the mid 1820s, auctioneers were by all appearances going from strength to strength. In 1825, auctioneers across America sold 21 percent of the entire inventory of U.S imports, a portion of the trade that added up to just over 20 million dollars worth of business. Nor were the auctions’ successes confined to imports. Between 1824 and 1826 auctioneers sold an average of \$3,167, 045 worth of domestic dry goods a year in New York: an increase of just over 2 million dollars since 1818. Business was booming and urban retailers, country store owners, peddlers and even the occasional consumer showed no signs of forsaking the auction rooms and the bargains they offered. Moreover, the auctioneers’ arguments had also gained some political legitimacy. In 1824, east coast merchants had pushed another bill into Congress, this time attempting to place

²⁷ A Plain and Practical Man, *Remarks upon the Auction System*, 26, 18; *The Auction System, Being a Series of Numbers*, 31, 29.

a 7.5 percent tax on all sales. It went the same way as its predecessors, with Congress taking no action and the anti-auction forces forced once again to admit defeat. They were now running out of options but they had not quite given up yet. They decided to stage one more political assault, a decision prompted by the passage of the Tariff of Abominations into law in 1828.²⁸

In the normal course of events, merchants would have viewed the institution of this tariff with horror. But as anti-auction lobbyists they could see a potential gain. The passage of the tariff galvanized one of their chief allies in the fight against auctions. Protectionists - men who belonged to the American Institute or the American Society for the Encouragement of Domestic Manufactures - had long hated auctioneers for their capacity to channel cheap imports into the country and edge American merchandise out of the market. Their campaign against auctions had always been premised on the belief that tariffs of any kind would cripple auctioneers and leave the way free for American manufacturers. Merchants, desperate to try and curb the auctioneers' successes, threw aside their usual disdain for the pro-tariff men in order to make the most of the protectionists' political power. United by personal interest and a desire to end what they saw as the corrupting and unpatriotic commercial dealings of the auctioneer, they constituted a formidable alliance.²⁹

On the 2nd of May 1828, eighteen merchants calling themselves the New-York Anti-Auction Committee gathered at the Masonic Hall to formulate their campaign. Their

²⁸ Cohen, "The Auction System in the Port of New-York," 496, 498; Westerfield, "The Early History of American Auctions," 206.

²⁹ For the American Institute's position see *Report of a Special Committee of the American Institute on the Subject of Cash Duties, the Auction System &c. January 12 1829* (New York: J.M Danforth, Printer, Evening City Gazette, 1829), Box 466, American Institute Collection, N-YHS; see also *Memorial of the American Society for the Encouragement of Domestic Manufactures January 21, 1822* (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1822). See also Eiselen, *The Rise of Pennsylvania Protectionism*, 83-88.

efforts were led by the well connected merchant, Thomas H. Leggett, whose family had a history of objecting to auctions. Twenty eight years earlier, Leggett's cousin, claiming his word of honor to be enough, had deliberately refused to provide guarantors of his credit, a condition of purchase at auctions in 1800. His obstinacy provoked the wrath of powerful auctioneers but did little to prevent auctioneers demanding credit guarantees. Thomas H. Leggett's own opposition to auctions went far beyond a personal stand. With the committee in place, Leggett and his band of merchants formulated a cogent attack upon the auction system. Like its predecessors, this attack began in a pamphlet. But Leggett and his allies had seen pamphlets fail before. Thus they went one step further. At a second meeting in October, Leggett turned the pamphlet into a political platform, and the meeting of mechanics and merchants nominated a slate of three men who would run for Congress on the anti-auction ticket.³⁰

In the month before the elections, the anti-auction constituency worked tirelessly to engender support for their cause. A committee of fifty men was created to circulate memorials, particularly to skilled craftsmen, demanding a 10 percent tax on auction sales and gain signatures for anti-auction petitions. Their efforts met with extraordinary success. Meetings were held in Philadelphia and Baltimore and more than fifty memorials, from nearly every state, reached Washington that fall. The petition organizers managed to obtain over 10,000 names, men who demanded that the auction system be dismantled. Leggett's committee also began to publish their own newspaper, entitled the *Anti-Auctioneer*. The paper devoted itself to denigrating the auction and highlighting in

³⁰ *Reasons Why the Present System of Auctions Ought to Be Abolished* (New York, 1828) reprinted as "The Auction System" *Niles Weekly Register*, June 14, 1828, 258; on Leggett see Barrett, *The Old Merchants of New York City*, 249-250; see also Horace Secrist "The anti-auction movement and New York Workingmen's party of 1829" *Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters*, 17 (June, 1914): 150-152.

particular its monopolistic nature and its tendency to encourage speculation and luck over honest hard work. As a result, anti-auction merchants and protectionist manufacturers were joined by a third ally – the urban artisan. A small group of tradesmen, whose products were edged out of the market by cheap British textiles and commodities, objected to the auction with the same passion as Leggett, although for different reasons. The ‘get rich quick’ attitude that pervaded auction sales was one cause for disgust. A second was the auctioneers’ financial power which enabled them to offer or deny men a line of credit, giving licensed auctioneers an astonishing amount of power over others. This thinly-veiled monopoly on credit provoked unmitigated disgust for auctions amongst working men, who viewed financial elites with deep mistrust. The *Anti-Auctioneer* skillfully appealed to all these sentiments, and Leggett even made sure that his committee and the election ticket included some members who had serious credentials among working class men to increase the movement’s credibility. It seemed that the auctioneers had finally met their match, opponents inspired by something more than financial gain. The anti-auction coalition were fighting against a system they believed to be intrinsically un-American in its lack of democracy.³¹

But despite their astonishing unanimity, their efforts failed once again. Their failure turned on the fact that auctions bought “immense trade” and thus immense wealth into New York City. It was not simply the city’s retailers who benefited from public sales. The auction trade drew merchants from all over the country, like moths to a flame. Once in the city these visitors stayed at hotels and enjoyed the delights of New York’s

³¹ “The Auction System,” *Niles Weekly Register* Jul. 26, 1828, 349; “Auctions,” *Niles Weekly Register* Nov. 29, 1828, 898; New York, *The Anti-Auctioneer* Nov., 1, 1828; Westerfield, “The History of Early American Auctions,” 206; Secrist “The anti-auction movement,” 150-154; Greenberg, *Advocating The Man*, <http://www.gutenberg-e.org/greenberg/Chapter3JRG.html>, 5-10, [accessed Jan., 14, 2008].

theatre and other entertainments. Auctions made work for porters, carters, clerks and errand boys. Sailors and ship's captains found work thanks to auctions. Above all, the auctioneers continued to emphasize just how much they paid in taxes to the state, money that furnished other projects, such as the construction of the Erie Canal, that the financial elite in New York did not want to see collapse. Thus, although the anti-auction candidates enjoyed a modest popularity in the mercantile wards of the city, none of them were successfully elected. As an added blow, Congress chose not to act on the memorials, claiming that a rush of other business had swept the auction issue aside. This crushing defeat left merchants like Leggett at a total loss. With no other options, they retreated to their warehouses to lick their wounds. By the end of 1828, only the mechanics of New York remained in the ring. Abandoned by the merchants, they nonetheless continued to criticize auctions through published attacks and political action. As part of that effort, a small group of men organized themselves into their own Committee of Fifty, which met in April, 1829 to reconsider their options. But as they formulated a new platform, auctions began to take a back seat. The printers, machinists and shoemakers who gathered in 1829 concentrated more on the monopoly practices of state-chartered banks, which had all too often denied them loans and failed to take care of their hard earned deposits. Auctioneers, while condemned as part of the "banking aristocracy," ceased to be the focus of attention.³²

The obvious outcome of these failures was that auctioneers continued to enjoy the relative commercial advantages of low duty sales. But there was another, more intangible result as well. The auctioneers' political successes added up to an endorsement of their

³² New York *Evening Post* Feb. 17, 1829, 4; New York *American*, Jan. 3, 1829, 2, both cited in Secrist, "The anti-auction movement," 155-157. *Report of the Committee of Fifty* (New York, 1829), 9

vision of America's political economy. The auctioneers had argued in 1828 that "in this *free and happy republic, every man has a right to be ruined in his own way.*" Despite the clear risks that commercial consumers took at the auction house on the behalf of the ultimate consumer, the right to take such a risk, unfettered by the federal government's efforts to shape the economy was something they were entitled to as Americans. By once again invoking a language of rights, the auctioneers helped to articulate the idea that Americans were independent citizens and as a result had a right to make economic choices as they saw fit. "The retailers and consumers do not want guardians," argued the auctioneers. By making consumers' independence the lynchpin of their argument, they bolstered the consumer's ability to claim the civic privilege of free choice in the marketplace. The public decision to eschew candidates that might indeed have provided consumers with guardians, and Congress' failure to pursue legislation that would ensure the same, seems to suggest that a majority of Americans agreed, despite the merchants' anxieties about the kind of economy this might yield. In fact, by connecting the figure of the consumer to the retailer instead of the farmer, the auctioneers had effected a subtle yet profound shift. As champions of the yeoman consumer, auctioneers had promoted the idea that the consumer's rights were embedded in the labor he did as a citizen. By shifting the identification of the consumer towards the commercial retailer, the auctioneers were suggesting that citizens expected to be left free to take personal risks and seek self-serving opportunity. As such, they imagined a set of economic rights that existed outside the parameters of a citizen's production. Moreover, by the late 1820s, it was clear that these same Americans had rejected the idea that consuming citizens were obliged to help in the task of balancing the country's economic interests and protecting

the nation from the depredations of foreign commerce. It was one of many realizations that would help to wear down the republican vision of political economy in the antebellum era.³³

After 1828, auctions ceased to be such a lightning rod in debates over American political economy. Larger proportions of American merchants sent agents abroad, soliciting trade directly and buying goods on their own accounts, thus providing English merchants and manufacturers with immediate funds. This deterred English sellers from shipping goods to America and waiting for the auctioneers to remit the funds back to them. In this way, American importers were finally able to cut the auctioneers out of their previous business. New credit arrangements reinforced this shift. Merchants used foreign partners to guarantee the European sellers their money directly, thus providing new security in the transatlantic marketplace for European merchants and manufacturers and boosting the proportion of trade that Europeans conducted with American merchants. American wholesalers also began to do a better job of courting the American retailers. They employed men who sought out the country traders when they arrived in the city. These agents would entertain and then retain the visitor's business. They also began to offer their buyers a one price system which eliminated the guesswork that went along with buying at auction. For young men who came from increasingly far afield to buy their stock in the emporiums of New York and Philadelphia, these new techniques and strategies were attractive and over time helped redistribute their custom. As such,

³³ *An Examination of the Reasons Why the Present System of Auctions Ought to be Abolished: As Set Forth By the Committee of New York Merchants, Opposed to the Auction System* (Boston: Beals, Homer & Co., 1828), 15-16.

American merchants were finally able to regain what they considered to be a good proportion of trade.³⁴

By the 1830s auction sales were more often used by wholesale merchants to clear their warehouses of old stock or as was increasingly common, they were used as sites to sell second hand goods. Vendues became the place to buy the goods of a bankrupt family or the unredeemed items from the local pawnshop. As a result the clientele of the auction house shifted away from the retailers and middle merchants and became largely composed of individuals who hoped to furnish their homes cheaply and efficiently. The ultimate consumer took over the auction house at last. As a result of this shift, the auctioneers' claims that the consumer did not deserve special protection in the marketplace became part of the ethical lens that Americans began to apply to their understanding of the marketplace. In fact, after 1828, it was the behavior of the individual consumer at the auction that became the focus of popular criticism, rather than the auction system itself. This cultural shift meant that the consumers' actions came under scrutiny in a way that had not been the case through the first two decades of the nineteenth century. By the end of the 1840s consumers were lampooned for their participation in auction sales and ridiculed rather than pitied when they were deceived by the wily auctioneer.³⁵

This sea change in attitudes can be summed up by an examination of a small story on auction rooms that appeared in both the *New-York Mirror* and the *Poughkeepsie*

³⁴ Cohen, "The Auction System in the Port of New York," 506-7; on jobber entertaining see John Beauchamp Jones, *Life and Adventures of a Country Merchant. A Narrative of his Exploits at Home, During His Travels and in the Cities. Designed to Amuse and Instruct* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1854), 254-277. I thank Paul Erickson for this reference.

³⁵ On the sentimentalization of personal property and the ways in which goods became the repository of feeling rather than simply reflections of status see Woloson "In Hock. Pawning in Early America," 55.

Casket in 1834 and 1836 respectively. The piece took the reader on a tour of the auction room, describing the cast of characters that assembled there on the lookout for a bargain. If the auction house of the early 1820s had been a thunderous crush of commercial energy set in the precincts of Pearl Street, then the auction house of the mid 1830s assumed a very different location and character. Auction houses in New York now nestled along Broadway and Fifth Avenue, set apart from the old center of commercial activity and the scene that the story revealed was a domestic one: the former home of a family that was now bankrupt. Instead of hard headed merchants and jobbers, this auction room was filled with young couples trying to furnish their home with meager funds and miserly dealers looking to buy up cheap furniture to off load on a different family on another day. These sales were not new to the 1830s, on the contrary, these kinds of sales, or forced vendues, were familiar terrain on the American economic landscape. Some auctioneers had in fact always specialized in these kinds of sales, eschewing the frenzy of the dry goods trade and its speculation. In New York, one auctioneer, Solomon Seixas, focused only on selling off second hand goods that he characterized as bankrupt's sales, as well as taking advantage of his family's pawnbroking store, which gave him an ample supply of unredeemed pawns to sell off at auction. What had changed by the 1830s were peoples' attitudes towards these kinds of auctions.³⁶

The story in the *New-York Mirror* revealed this by characterizing the auction sale in this context as a violation of the domestic sphere. "What a different kind of company" noted the article, "has often sat around these tables, enjoying the use of many of those

³⁶"The Red Flag" *Harper's Weekly* 25 (April 1857); "Scenes in an Auction-Room" *The New-Mirror: a Weekly Gazette of Literature and Fine Arts* (Sept. 20, 1834), 91. See the article of the same title in *The Poughkeepsie Casket* (Apr. 23, 1836), 70. For the business of Solomon Seixas see Seixas Return, Folder '1828,' Box 'Returns 1825-31 Auctions,' N-YHS and also Wendy Woloson, "In Hock" 50.

articles which are now coolly looked on as matters of merchandise...all disgraced by the unrespective hands of brokers and bargain seekers.” The transformation of cherished family possessions that had materially constituted the private home into commodities shocked the sensibilities of readers who understood the conventions of sentimental literature. Not only did this story reveal the ways in which auctions sullied the sanctity of the home but it also highlighted the ways in which the advantages of the sale came at the expense of another family. Although this had always sent an undercurrent of unease through the buying public, it had previously been related to their concern that they might also end in ruin by speculating at auctions. By the 1830s this discomfort was centered on the immorality of consumers who took advantage of another family’s adversity. The story described the different buyers who pushed each other out of the way in order to secure a bargain. Impoverished young women, forced to the auction in their attempt to furnish their first home, were pushed to one side by seasoned bargain hunters and tradesmen. These consumers, whose self-interest overrode any concern for the family who had lost their home, and whose greed caused them to deny an opportunity to those whose need outstripped their own, were severely chastised. The implications were unpleasant. In this microcosm of the marketplace, no one was there to regulate the consumer and ensure that everyone was treated fairly. Without government or regulation, the ethics of the marketplace were now in the hands of consumers themselves, and they could not be counted on to behave fairly.³⁷

With consumers shouldering new responsibility, older complaints about regulating auctions to prevent trickery and deception, now became cautionary tales about the stupidity of consumers who did not know any better. Mocking the greedy gullibility

³⁷ “Scenes in an Auction-Room” *The New-Mirror* (Sept. 20, 1834), 91.

of these bargain seekers, one article described the sale of a piano that was marketed as capable of producing better music since its manufacturer had jumped out of a window when he had a vision that he could improve his music if he flew with the angels. The ludicrous nature of this piece of puffery not only lampooned the auctioneers but the consumers who were gullible enough to fall for these cons. Although newspapers warned consumers to stay away from “trumpery auction shops” and unlicensed vendues, these stories also expressed scorn for those that fell prey to such tricks and deceptions. As consumers flocked to buy plated trinkets and cases of knick knacks, newspapers and periodicals filled with stories that laughed at the individuals who glibly allowed themselves to be cheated out of their money.³⁸

The conviction that consumers also represented the agricultural interest also disappeared to be replaced by a new conception of the consumer as status seeker. One of the more popular tropes of auction story by the 1850s was the tale of the young couple who attempted to elevate their social position by furnishing their home with luxurious goods bought cheaply at auction. As periodicals such as *Harper's Weekly* noted, April was the auctioneer's harvest, a time when many families would leave the city because of “declining business” the “breaking up of housekeeping” or because they were “leaving for Europe.” These well known phrases often signaled bankruptcy, although it was possible that a genuine need to relocate would prompt a family to sell their goods at auction. Youthful husbands and wives would hurry to these sales, attempting to salvage an elegant bureau or fine French clock from the wreckage. But bargains were not easy to

³⁸ See “Auction Eloquence” *The New-Yorker* (Nov. 16, 1839), 136; “Mock Auctions” *Atkinson's Saturday Evening Post*, Aug. 25, 1838; “Auction-Burners” *The New-Yorker* (Sept. 8, 1838), 397; “Another Auction Outrage” *Atkinson's Saturday Evening Post*, Sept. 15, 1838; “Scene at a Petty Auction” *The New-Yorker* (Jan. 12 1839), 269.

acquire. All too often, the couple would find themselves in possession of shabby or useless articles, either tricked by the auctioneer or simply swept away with the frenzy of the sale. These stories, which ended with a chastened couple swearing that they would no longer attempt to cut corners in their efforts to purchase fine things, sent a clear message to potential consumers about the nature of class and status. Fine belongings could only earn one social status and respect, if they were truly earned.³⁹

It is notable that this message was aimed at a potential consumer, rather than a legislative body or mercantile community. By the 1850s the anxiety that surrounded the auction sale as a site within the marketplace was focused around the behavior of the consumer and their use of the auction, rather than the auctioneer or a system of commerce. Cultural commentators, who wrote these short satires, aimed their indignation at over eager or grasping consumers, and their failure to regulate themselves. But these critiques also revealed a deeper anxiety over the ways in which auctions revealed the tenuous nature of social order within American communities. Not only did auctions make manifest the economic destruction of wealthy or respected families, they also provided the opportunity for those who were lower on the social scale to acquire the accoutrements that Americans used to read status and then confer good standing. Depictions of auction sales made these tensions clear. [Fig. 3.4] The crowded room, where bearded Jews could rub shoulders with respectable young men and women signaled the complete disintegration of propriety and order. The possibility of acquiring a bargain affected all of humanity in the same way. Jostling for the chance to bid and win was a great leveler and

³⁹ "The Red Flag" *Harper's Weekly* (Apr. 25, 1857). On women who sold goods at auction when they were on the move see Frances Marvin Smith Webster to Lucien Bonaparte Webster, May 21, 1846 in *The Websters: Letters of an Army Family in Peace and War, 1836-1853* ed., Van R. Baker, (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2000), 327. For the classic story of how bargain hunting at auction ended in disaster see "How We Furnished Our House" *Harper's Weekly* (Apr. 3, 1858).

in the confines of the auction room Americans faced the democratic tendencies of their marketplace. Despite the fact that many went to acquire status possessions, the auction room revealed a microcosm of an unregulated marketplace filled with competing consumers.

The conflict over auctions left a lasting impression on American ideas about the consumer as a citizen. First, the debate had fundamentally changed how the commercial world imagined the consumer. At the start of the decade, merchants and auctioneers had both taken their cue from the political economists of the day. As a result they had barely conceived of consumers, concentrating instead on an economy oriented around three intersecting interests, commerce, agriculture and manufacturing, where the needs and actions of the consumer hardly intruded. As the exigencies of the debate took hold, merchants and auctioneers chose to alter their impressions. They constructed a consumer who was a hard working rural innocent, representative of an agricultural interest that deserved protection from the vicissitudes of the marketplace. It was a vision that served their interests as well. But by the mid 1820s, both sides had realized that this vision did not correspond to the reality that they faced. Ultimately, the consumers' actual desires and decisions forced both merchants and auctioneers to radically reformulate their understanding of the consumer. They were left with an individual, whose rights were claimed not only as producers but as consumers too, and whose choices shaped not only their own lives but the market as well.

As this new vision of the consumer began to gain currency, new ideas about their rights and responsibilities took hold. The consumer's right to purchase meant that each

individual shopper could make whatever choices they wanted in the marketplace. Federal regulation could not interfere with their ability to pick out whatever they desired, even if that good was less well made or did not serve what cultural and political elites perceived to be in the interest of the nation more broadly defined. By removing the process of choosing and purchasing goods from the spectrum of duties that a citizen owed their nation in the name of the “public good” the auctioneers contrived to remove consumption from the context of a republican political economy that balanced interest and need against one another to protect civic equality. However, the outcome of the auction conflicts also confirmed a different understanding of citizenship. Merchants had successfully suggested that the right to purchase came alongside new civic responsibilities. Drawing on the belief that citizens had duties and obligations, the merchants began to hint that citizens had a responsibility to make purchases that represented the nation well. A consumer’s choice reflected the nation’s broader values, and poor choices undermined the progress the young country was making towards civilization. “I have heard it remarked by foreigners” fretted one American, “that in no country are so many *flimsy* goods sold as in this, although no country possesses such ample means.” Anxiety over this kind of embarrassing disparity could only be allayed if consumers took on the civic responsibility of making their choices in a manner that reflected well upon the nation.⁴⁰

To be sure, the anxiety that surrounded auction sales was in part a wider an discomfort with the ways in which the marketplace was changing. As older networks of business dissolved and new money meant changing markers and categories of status, the ways in which Americans navigated the marketplace and used commercial culture to get ahead became increasingly worrisome. As highly finished manufactured consumer goods

⁴⁰ A Plain Practical Man, *Remarks on the Auction System*, 18.

began to compete with property and labor as markers of status, the question of who could buy those goods and indeed, how they got them, became more important and consequently more likely to generate anxiety. But what is clear from critiques of auction sales that date from the 1830s and 1840s is that the individual consumer had become the focus of popular criticism. In part, this was because the auction houses were now frequented by the ultimate consumer, rather than someone buying on their behalf. But it was also because Americans now understood the consumer to have a new responsibility to themselves.

But this new responsibility was quite distinct from the duties that had come before it. This was an obligation that was rooted in the politics of representation and appearance, rather than in the pursuit of a balanced political economy. By the 1830s writers for magazines and newspapers were making tentative efforts to graft this new obligation into older understandings of good economic citizenship. While consumers were free to choose in the auction house, they also had new responsibilities, to choose goods that reflected the cultural progress and economic power of their country. Acutely aware that the United States was under constant observation, some critics worried that the consumer's right to choose what they wanted, might reflect poorly on American society. Thus the unexpected outcome of the auction conflicts was not only that it reshaped American understandings of political economy but that it opened up a new realm for Americans to practice good citizenship. The freedom to consume unfettered by regulation became a facet of the many privileges that American citizens could hope to enjoy. But at the same time, their choices became subject to a new cultural scrutiny. While Americans still measured a great deal of their civic worth through their labor, their consumption slowly became meaningful in

new ways. But, as with all concepts of citizenship and inclusion, new hierarchies of belonging were created over the course of the nineteenth century. As the idea that the government might regulate their citizens' consumption began to fade away, the arbiters of taste would come into their own, shaping new meanings of good citizenship out of the consumer choices that the people made.



(Fig. 3.1) Detail of a print from 1819, highlighting the auction or sheriff's sale as one of the consequences of the Panic of 1819.

***Brother Jonathan's soliloquy on the times* (s.n., ca. 1819? also dated 1812, 1832).
Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.**

Great Attraction!

**RICH
SPRING GOODS
FROM NEW YORK AUCTIONS!**

C. A. UPTON & CO.

Are now receiving from Auctions and other sources, the largest variety of Rich Goods for the Spring trade that have ever been offered in Worcester. We would say to our friends and patrons that we are now daily opening packages of New Goods well worth attention. Strangers will find our store the best place to buy their Spring Goods, as we shall always offer the best Goods at the lowest prices.

SHAWLS. SHAWLS.

In this department we are on hand, and can present a variety unequalled by any concern in the city. In Rich Cashmere Shawls we have some splendid bargains; a good Brochu Shawl we are selling at \$2.00. We have in Store

15 CARTONS OF BLACK SILK SHAWLS.

some with extra heavy fringes, a very fair article, can be had for \$3.75. Canton Cape Shawls of every shade, together with every other desirable style in the market.

TURK SATIN, PARASOLS AND PARASOLETTES,

Mantilles and Visettes, ready made and of the latest fashions.

BLACK and GAMBLEDON SILKS, of every style and quality, for Dresses and Visettes.

DRESS GOODS.

We are opening an elegant stock of new Garages, Groundlines, Cameleon Lustras, French Jaconets, Lawns, Gingham, de Laines, &c. Fringes for Visettes and Mantilles.

DOMESTIC GOODS we are selling at less than full prices—2-4 brown Cotton 3 c.; 4-4 do do 4 c.; Ticking 8 c.; Gingham 10 c.; Prints 3 c.; Good do. for Dresses, 6 c.; Lawns 12 c.; 50 doz. Linen Handkerchiefs 6 c.; together with many other goods unusually cheap.

Purchasers are respectfully invited to examine our stock before making their selections, as they will find civil treatment and more goods for one dollar than can be had at any other store in the city.

C. A. UPTON & CO., 140 Main st.

Worcester, April 13, 1849.

Tyler & Hamilton, Printers, (Palladium Office,) 11 and 12 Central Exchange, Worcester.

(Fig. 3.2) C.A Upton & Co. *Great Attraction! Rich spring goods from New York Auctions!* (Worcester, Mass: Tyler and Hamilton, Printers (Palladium Office,) 11 and 12 Central Exchange, Worcester, 1849). Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

T. KEMPSTALL,

OF the late firm of Ira West & Co. and
at the old stand of said firm, has just
received a very extensive assortment of

GOODS,

mostly from the Auction rooms in New
York, which, for variety and cheapness,
cannot be outdone in this market. He is
well aware that Goods must be sold cheap
in this market, or not sold at all; and this
course he is determined rigidly to pursue.

Country Merchants who may want to
replenish their assortments from time to
time, can do it with him at a very small
advance from auction prices. His stock of

GROCERIES

is truly inviting, from which Tavern Keep-
ers can supply themselves upon the very
best terms.

CASH

is paid for PORK, WHEAT, CORN,
RYE, WHISKEY, and POT & PEARL
ASHES.

Rochester, Dec. 22, 1823.

86

(Fig 3.3) Advertisement from the (Rochester) *Telegraph*, January, 6th 1824.

Vol. II.—No. 66.] NEW YORK, SATURDAY, APRIL 3, 1858. [PRICE FIVE CENTS.

1. NEW YORK UNIVERSITY WITH BOARD, OFFICE OF
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[illegible][illegible]

However, after a few days of this moth-holding, we were forced to take ourselves as fast to the serious business of filling our house with something so substantial that the stuporous fancies were which we had unconsciously, and this time, I flatter myself, we went about the business in a well-thought way. We had a good course; therefore, if we spent so much on the surface as much on the inside, as to reach the kitchen, as much on the dining-room, and so on in the stairs, there would be left. Well, these would be worth, through our estimates and been made with the most accurate possible.

So, at Castle Maudslayi, by going to vaccination we could buy every thing for a mere nothing and taking by the *flâneur* the road one an adventure worth the risk of the day that day of the heart of the town, H. Hanning, the well-known author, would see the entire population of a wealthy family going to Europe; and families consisting of "fine tapestry carpets, three silks and two cottons, two woolen parlor suits in broadcloth, pink brocade and a woman's black, white, etc. in silk, pink brocade, etc. wool and cashmere coats, silk, and fancy boleros, rosewood and mahogany furniture and many more things; French glass, silver and gold cutlery, a selection of fine and elegant linen to go to

gile frames; mahogany and rose-wood beamed, sprung and hair mattresses; beds and bedding; gas stoves and burners; together with a large assortment of new furniture, sundry, crockery, plates and silver ware; the whole to be periodically exhibited gratis, and weekly the attraction of human curiosity and the trade."

This was evidently the thing we expected, so we hurried to the platform, and found ourselves in the middle of a crowd as I had seen the day before. There were a number of old women, among whom we recognized several clients of Mrs. Tootles'. And as two young ladies (Miss Cartwheels, here, possibly as Miss Farmington) a number of respectable-looking men, who seemed to belong to the business, as though they were not to know the ladies, and a few men in military uniforms, they seemed to say to each other if they noticed a lady or two passing with exaggerated eyes at the different places. Two or three fishermen, dressed with fisherman's clothes, which they considered very early to break of regular intervals, and quite a number of persons who, to my eyes, seemed confirmed members of the "fussy."

The first article which was put up for sale was a lot of broken wine-glasses. There were said to be enough, my wife said, to stop the mouth of Mrs. Twiss. There followed a little case of Capt. Carver's umbrellas if he ever "threw up his hands." So, when it was put up, I bid, bidding, five shillings a yard, and it was a successful affair for some time afterwards, my fear of scandal being checked down to my heart's content. The crowd-grained man, after staring at Harry and me, told sixpence more, and, in spite of Carver's appeal, I let him have it. It was handed down to him; I discovered afterwards that it was full of holes.

[illegible]

"Four" cried mother of the cross-grained lady.
"Five" said I, in the easiness of the moment.
"Six!" shouted the yepness.
"It's perfectly lovely," whispered Karen in my ear, and, obedient to the suggestion, I nodded.

"Seven and a half," cried the assistants: "and
ericks which had the thermometer swung five-
what again?"

"Seven and a half," but Mr. Toombs, by my side,
joked "Seven and a half," the assistants,
watching my face, arrived, or perhaps to be
satisfied, a tall from the crowd, then turning to me,
said, "My son, and it's yours." I said "Yes,"
and then, a splendor of the moment.

[illegible]

(Fig. 3.4.) “How We Furnished Our House” *Harper’s Weekly*, Apr. 3, 1858.

Chapter Four

Fancy Articles and Objects of Utility: The Exhibitions of the Franklin and American Institutes, 1824-1852.

In July of 1824, five members of the newly organized Franklin Institute of Philadelphia came together to hold a meeting of the Committee on Premiums and continued to do so throughout the summer. At each meeting they made decisions that would shape the eagerly anticipated first annual exhibition of their society: a society created to promote domestic manufacturing in the United States. Early on they decided to hold the fair in Carpenter's Hall. This venue, owned by the carpenter's guild and home to the First Continental Congress in 1774, would surely communicate their efforts to marry American manufacturing and American patriotism. They requested designs for medals from local metal workers, hoping to find a motif that would encapsulate their vision of American manufacturing, settling finally on a picture of Franklin himself. In September, they sent circulars to all Philadelphia mechanics, soliciting contributions for their great undertaking. As the fair approached, the Committee settled themselves to the most

important task of all: the question of who would judge the exhibits and what those exhibits would be. They created eleven judging committees in all; including iron and steel, copper and brass, chemical compositions, cotton goods, leatherware and cabinetware. These committees reflected the thirty prizes they hoped to hand out, prizes they had chosen to spur innovations in heavy industry and fabric technology.

As it turned out, all their carefully laid plans unraveled. In the few days before the exhibition opened, the goods flowed in to Carpenter's Hall and they were not the goods they had been expecting. In a mad scramble, the organizers started to revise their committees. Judges were dropped and replaced, other committees such as glassware disappeared altogether. Finally, the Committee had to create five new judging panels: paper hangings, fine arts, musical instruments, agricultural implements and paints and colors. Even this did not fully cover the items that Philadelphia's mechanics, manufacturers and craftsmen had sent to the Franklin Institute exhibition. The Committee had never anticipated such an array of goods. After three hectic days the fair closed and the Institute handed out its awards in a grand public ceremony. The thirty prizes they offered seemed to be glaringly inappropriate, since hardly any of the exhibition items matched what they had asked for. They had hoped to attract manufacturers working with Pennsylvania's vast natural mineral resources: exhibits that would display Philadelphia's technical innovation in heavy industry. But of the thirty awards they finally handed out, only nine were on the original list published in the weeks before the exhibition. Moreover, these awards for heavy industry, such as best bar iron and best coarse woolen fabric, stood out as an anomaly. Instead, Philadelphia's artisans had submitted carpets and clocks, pianos and tea trays, despite the lack of awards offered. Against their better

judgment, the Franklin Institute felt obliged to award these fancy and refined goods with recommendations and medals.¹

Manufacturers were not alone in influencing the course of the Institutes' activities: fair-goers and consumers also challenged and affected the Institutes' intentions. At the very same exhibition, the Committee on Premiums noticed that one object in the hall seemed to be attracting a great deal of attention. They soon discovered that it was a "beautiful *maroon work box*, manufactured by William Tait." The committee quickly deemed the item as "deserving of much praise for the ingenuity and taste displayed in its design, and the neatness of its execution, rivaling the best specimens of imported articles of similar kind."² But clearly this interest came as something of a surprise. The managers had hoped that they would inspire interest from consumers to be sure, but not an interest in these luxury items. "[A]lthough your Committee do not conceive fancy articles of so much importance as objects of utility," the judges noted, "they form an important branch of *domestic industry* and where they are distinguished for excellence of workmanship, they ought to receive the encouragement of the Institute. Your Committee therefore recommend that BRONZE MEDAL be awarded to Mr. Tait for his elegant *work box*."³ Surprised as the judges were, they could not ignore the interest generated by Tait's workbook, though they conveyed their belief that this was not

¹ "Minute Book of the Committee on Premiums and Exhibitions of the Franklin Institute 1824-25," *The Records of the Committee on Science and the Arts of the Franklin Institute, 1824-1900* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1977), Text-fiche 208-A-1 to 208-E-2; *First Annual Report of the Proceedings of the Franklin Institute of the State of Pennsylvania for the Promotion of the Mechanic Arts to which are affixed the Charter, Constitution and By-Laws of the Institute with a List of Members and Officers for 18124 and 1825 and the Standing Committees for 1825* (Philadelphia: J. Harding, 1825), 64-66.

² *Franklin Institute First Annual Report*, 67.

³ *Ibid.*, 67 See also *Report of the Committee on Premiums and Exhibitions of the Franklin Institute of the State of Pennsylvania for the Promotion of the Mechanic Arts on the Sixth Exhibition, Held September, 1830* (Philadelphia: J. Harding, 1830), 6. At this exhibition the organizers discovered that the female visitors to the fair were unusually interested in the displays of straw bonnets. On this occasion however they refused to hand out a premium, feeling that there was no need since it was a branch of manufacturing that was already flourishing.

truly a superior good by awarding only a bronze medal and not a silver one. Although these were not the consumer goods that the Institute had planned to promote, they were apparently the goods that American consumers who visited the fair wanted to see.

The managers of the Franklin Institute may have hoped that these problems were simply due to everyone's inexperience. They were wrong. The clash of expectations between the Institute and the various exhibitors in 1824, recurred annually. Nor was the Franklin Institute alone in experiencing these problems. The American Institute of New York, also dedicated to showcasing American manufacturing, encountered a similar dilemma over the course of its career, which began in 1828. Over the course of several decades, both organizations grappled with an uncooperative manufacturing community, which refused to provide the items that the Institutes anticipated, as well as a willful public, whose interest in the highly finished manufactured goods ignored the aims of the Institutes' officers to encourage the production of cheap textiles and metal building materials for the United States. Between the 1820s and the 1840s both urban Institutes struggled to gain some control over this headstrong crowd of producers and consumers. By the 1850s however, the Institutes bowed to the interests and actions of the public whom they had fought to educate. With this capitulation, the Institutes' officers and membership contributed to a growing understanding of the American consumer as a figure whose desires had market value and whose taste was something to be carefully guided and educated. Forced to re-evaluate the consumer and the consumer's place in America's political economy, the Institutes' officers made a contribution to an ongoing process in American society that was slowly redefining the role of the consumer as an American citizen.

This chapter examines a little known aspect of the Franklin and American Institutes' history, one that reveals both organizations as seriously altering urban understandings of the consumer in Philadelphia and New York in the mid-nineteenth century. Despite their popularity and longevity as exhibitors of consumer goods, neither Institute have attracted much attention from historians who seek to explain the origins of consumer culture in the United States. Perhaps their identities in their later years - the first as science museum, the second as agricultural show and children's educational institute - have obscured their role as central organizations in the antebellum debates over the place consumption occupied in America's political economy.⁴ While scholars have discussed both the role that the Institutes played as an educational forum for nascent manufacturers and mechanics and the part these organizations took in shaping the political debates over the place of protectionism in the U.S. economy, historians have failed to explore the fact that at the peak of their success these organizations drew tens of thousands of visitors to their annual fairs, visitors who came to see the wide variety of consumer goods on display. Moreover, the Institutes' success spawned a host of copycat

⁴ Scholarship on these two Institutes, particularly the Franklin Institute, has explored in detail the organizations' contributions to the diffusion of industrial knowledge and advancements in manufacturing, as well as the central role both Institutes played in developing an elite network of industrialists and scientists. On the Franklin Institute see Bruce Sinclair, *Philadelphia's Philosopher Mechanics: A History of the Franklin Institute 1824-1865* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); Stephen P. Rice, *Minding the Machine: Languages of Class in Early Industrial America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 42-68; Anthony F. C. Wallace, *Rockdale: The Growth of an American Village in the Early Industrial Revolution*, rev. ed. (1978; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 77, 153, 185, 199, 227-239; Dominic Vitiello, "Engineering the Metropolis: William Sellers, Joseph M. Wilson, and Industrial Philadelphia," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 126 (Apr. 2002): 273-303; Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 135, 209; Walter Licht, *Getting Work: Philadelphia, 1840-1950* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 79-80. On the American Institute and particularly its role in political debates over tariff see Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 151, 162, 174-5, 189-90, 202, 271-81, 302-4.

institutions across the United States making them key national institutions whose efforts to shape the place of consumption in national life reverberated across the country.⁵

Taking the early years of these Institutes as its subject, this chapter investigates the ways in which the Institutes' officials imagined the nation's economy and the way in which the participants and visitors to the Institutes' annual exhibitions challenged that vision on a yearly basis. By tracing the story of this ongoing clash, this chapter argues that the Institutes' failures forced them to retreat from their promotion of producers creating a protected and self-sufficient economy, a concession that must have baffled these protectionists who had witnessed the growing political success of tariff as a federal government policy. Stymied by their lack of success, the Institutes instead turned to a hope of an independent American economy sustained by the taste and choice of consumers. It was a dramatic reversal of their previous aspirations but by the 1850s, the officers of the Institutes saw no other way.

As the auctioneers and merchants had only begun to realize in the 1830s, the desires and choices of American consumers were a significant factor in shaping the contours of the American economy. But unlike the merchants and cultural critics of

⁵ Examples of these activities are easily found in the institutional records. For business plans, particularly concerning silk production see for example "Silk Production" *Journal of the American Institute* 4 (Apr. 1839). The support for protectionism runs throughout all the published documents of both Institutes, but for the American Institute's specific efforts to appeal to Congress see *Remonstrance of the American Institute of the City of New York Against the Bill for Reducing the Revenue, Reported by the Committee of Ways and Means of the House of Representatives of the United States* (New York, 1833), Box 466, American Institute Collection, New-York Historical Society, New York, (hereafter N-YHS). Contemporaries acknowledged the prominence of both the Franklin Institute and American Institute and many fledgling organizations wrote to both looking for advice on how to start their associations. Once Institutes in other parts of the country had set themselves up they also looked to both the Franklin and American Institute for support and endorsement. See S. Newton to the Franklin Institute, Apr. 26, 1832, *The Records of the Committee on Science and the Arts of the Franklin Institute*, Text-fiche 202-B-12; W. Heintish to the Franklin Institute, June 18, 1859, *The Records of the Committee on Science and the Arts of the Franklin Institute*, Text-fiche 205-E-1; J. Watson Corr to the Franklin Institute, Dec. 25, 1830, *The Records of the Committee on Science and the Arts of the Franklin Institute*, Text-fiche 206-A 09; Jas. L Homer to T.B Wakeman Dec. 15, 1836, Box 75, Folder 16, American Institute Collection, N-YHS.

auctions, who had simply chastised irresponsible shoppers for their poor choices and lack of self-restraint, the men of the Institutes, and in particular the members of the Franklin Institute, set themselves the task of harnessing the power of the consumer for the improvement of the nation's economy. In Philadelphia, these philanthropic civic boosters turned to the question of how to develop consumers' taste so that it could better serve the nation, refashioning tasteful consumption into an act of good economic citizenship.

The Franklin and American Institutes, though newly founded in the 1820s, were not radical departures from the institutional landscape of Philadelphia and New York. As societies, their aim was to "afford producers and consumers of all manufactured articles an opportunity of becoming acquainted with each other[, w]ith a view to further develop the resources of the Union, increase the national independence, call forth the ingenuity and industry of the people, and thereby increase the comfort of the community at large."⁶ For many of the cities' inhabitants this goal would have been familiar, since it was the purpose of many, much older organizations dedicated to promoting manufacturing in the United States. Beginning in the 1760s a wide range of societies had existed that varied from efforts to encourage the public support of nascent manufacturing endeavors to organizations that rejected outright all British manufactured goods in effort to overthrow the "tyranny of British fashion."⁷ In the wake of the Revolution, with political independence established, the effort to nurture American manufacturing expanded. Despite the fact that Americans were still unable to compete realistically with British

⁶ (Philadelphia) *Saturday Evening Post*, Jul. 10, 1824.

⁷ Lawrence Peskin, *Manufacturing Revolution: The Intellectual Origins of Early American Industry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2003), 30-43; Dana Frank, *Buy American: The Untold Story of Economic Nationalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 4-30.

manufacturers, a variety of groups worked to foster the growth of American manufacturing. While some societies existed simply to provide charity and insurance for craftsmen and mechanics, others matured into sophisticated lobbying groups designed to promote protectionist tariffs in the US.⁸

During the 1790s and 1800s, the task of promoting manufacturing, particularly factory-based production, was no simple feat. Many different groups of Americans remained opposed to promoting manufacturing in the United States. One large and politically powerful group, the New England merchant community, remained suspicious because of their interest in protecting their lucrative business in importing European goods. These men, supportive of Alexander Hamilton's vision of a national bank, funded debt and free trade, were open to encouraging manufacturing through the implementation of bounties but refused to countenance the promotion of a protective tariff. To the men who relied on the maintenance of trade agreements to keep their commercial endeavors profitable, the espousal of protective tariffs was a direct threat to their livelihoods. While some were open to slowing the rampant importation of manufactured goods to preserve the balance of trade, they were not supporters of any tariff.⁹ Another group, more diffuse than the merchants but equally vocal, were ambivalent about promoting manufacturing for ideological reasons. Many in the Republican party, including President Jefferson

⁸ On charitable protection see for example John Howland, *An Address Delivered Before the Providence Association of Mechanics and Manufacturers, April 9th 1810: Being the Anniversaries of the Choice of Officers of the Association* (Providence, R.I.: Jones and Wheeler, 1810). On the rise of groups promoting protection see Peskin, *Manufacturing Revolution*, 65-114. See also Malcolm Rogers Eiselen, *The Rise of Pennsylvania Protectionism* (Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, 1974), 10-26, 50-52; Rice, *Minding the Machine*, 42-68.

⁹ A good example of this kind of merchant was Tench Coxe. For more on Coxe see Chapter 2, Peskin, *Manufacturing Revolution*, 95-101 and Jacob E. Cooke, *Tench Coxe and the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978). On the Federalist position more generally see Drew McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 146-165.

himself, remained deeply unsure about the place of manufacturing in the American political economy, believing that the United States should be an agrarian republic, importing consumer goods only as necessary. By preventing the growth of manufacturing in America, they hoped that U.S. citizens would not become the slaves of factory labor but would remain independent land owners. Even promoters of domestic manufacturing acknowledged this anxiety. In 1813, addressing the New York Society for the Promotion of Useful Arts, Theodric Beck pointed out that “it cannot be the wish of any true patriot, that the United States should become in any strict sense of the word, a manufacturing country. The disease, vice and diversified forms of misery that exists in those parts of England, from whence our hardware and cloths are obtained, are sufficient to make the most sanguine advocate for the encouragement of manufactures tremble.”¹⁰

It was not only the type of labor that manufacturing encouraged that caused consternation. To the Revolutionary generation, who had understood the importation of British goods as both the cause and consequence of the imperial stranglehold on America, imported, highly-finished manufactured goods signaled wanton luxury and colonial dependence. These goods included many every day items including woolens, printed calicoes, silks, carpets, silverware, plated ware, glass and chinaware, even shoe buckles and ribbons. Yet after the War of 1812, the idea that these goods could be prohibited from entering America had lost all credibility, although they continued to occupy an uneasy place in the cultural debates over American consumption. While many politicians and merchants simply lobbied for better commercial relations to strengthen the American

¹⁰ Theodric Romeyn Beck, MD., *Annual Address Delivered by Appointment Before the Society For the Promotion of Useful Arts, at the Capitol, in the City of Albany, on the 3rd of February 1813* (Albany, NY: Websters and Skinners, 1813) 8. The best descriptions of the conflict generated by different visions of American political economy during the Early Republic are McCoy, *The Elusive Republic*, and Peskin, *Manufacturing Revolution*.

economy through the collection of revenues, there remained many groups of mechanics, merchants and protectionists who believed that the United States economy would be best served if Americans could learn to make these imported goods for themselves. This wide ranging group of societies, who hoped to encourage manufacturing in the United States and assert its legitimacy as part of the new nation's political economy, faced a significant challenge.¹¹

Most of these groups decided early on that the quickest way to promote domestic manufacturing in America was to support the tariff. In Pennsylvania, the most powerful proponent of protectionist policy was Mathew Carey. Carey, a bookseller and publisher of the *American Museum*, a magazine dedicated to promoting protectionism, turned to the question of political economy in the 1790s and proved over the following decades to be one of the most outspoken and well respected voices on the issue of tariffs.¹² Carey, along with Tench Coxe and William Duane, the editor of the Philadelphia *Aurora*, had helped formulate the thinking behind Hamilton's famous *Report on Manufactures*. Carey spent most of the 1790s and 1800s writing in favor of federal tariffs. The national nature of these laws was crucial. While both the Massachusetts and Pennsylvania legislatures had passed laws instituting protective duties in the 1780s, the state legislation did not help as much as the mechanics would have liked. These laws could not prevent the goods being imported into ports outside of Pennsylvania or Massachusetts and then transported into the protected states, thus rendering them duty free. Because of these problems, mechanics increasingly began to claim that the tariff was a national issue.¹³

¹¹ See Chapter Two. On the merchants see Peskin, *Manufacturing Revolution*, 80-82.

¹² James N. Green, "Mathew Carey" *American National Biography*. www.anb.org [accessed Dec. 18, 2006]. See also Peskin, *Manufacturing Revolution*, 66-70.

¹³ Peskin, *Manufacturing Revolution*, 65-84.

The mechanics' support of the tariff became nationally popular in the wake of the War of 1812. A patriotic fervor, combined with the desire to support the nascent manufactories established during the war, led to the Tariff of 1816, a law that raised the protective duties on items such as cotton and woolen textiles, plated ware, metal buttons, copper and tin ware and cabinet-ware, carriages, woolen hats and straw bonnets.¹⁴ Yet, the support for the tariff was not a Congressional espousal of a permanently strong protective policy. More simply, the tariff was established to fund the war debt. It was certainly not intended to establish a permanent policy of protection to manufacturing and American industry. But the Panic of 1819 altered the public sentiment on tariff. With the prices of staple commodities falling as a result of the panic, imported goods glutting the marketplace and a general anxiety about the disrupted balance of trade, there was in 1819 a new interest in sustaining American protective policy.¹⁵

Out of this moment came a new impetus for societies promoting manufacturing. In 1819, Carey, responding to the panic of that year, founded the Philadelphia Society for the Promotion of National Industry and supplied its library and the reading public with a series of thirteen influential addresses on the need for a protective tariff.¹⁶ By 1822, New Yorkers had a similar institute of their own, and would have been familiar with the large brick building on Chamber Street, which housed the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen of the City of New York, designed to promote domestic manufacturing

¹⁴ J. Leander Bishop *A History of American Manufactures from 1608 to 1860 Exhibiting the Origin and Growth of the Principal Mechanic Arts and Manufactures from the Earliest Colonial Period to the Adoption of the Constitution and Comprising Annals of the Industry of the United States in Machinery, Manufactures and Useful Arts with Notice of The Important Inventions, Tariffs and the Result of Each Decennial Census* (Philadelphia: Edward Young and Co, 1866), 2: 229.

¹⁵ F.W Taussig, *The Tariff History of the United States* 7th ed. (1892; repr., New and London: Knickerbocker Press, 1923), 17-23.

¹⁶ Green, "Mathew Carey."

through the education of mechanics and apprentices.¹⁷ But what all these groups lacked was spectacle. Although they tried to persuade both Congress and their local communities of the central importance of the tariff in protecting manufacturers, they did so through pamphlets, petitions, libraries and lectures. What the Franklin and American Institutes hoped to do, was visually demonstrate the vitality and importance of American production through an exhibition, a spectacular, tactile marketplace, that not only rewarded the best producers for their innovation and skill, but physically embodied America's "enlightened national policy and the patriotic individual spirit" of its citizens.¹⁸

Here again, the organizers of the Institutes had a precedent to draw on: the agricultural fair. While Agricultural Societies, devoted to theory rather than practice, had existed since 1785 in America, the fair was a relatively new direction. The first had been held in 1811, organized by the Berkshire Society, led by Elkanah Watson. With its competitive display of livestock, educational booths, exhibits of home made goods, parades of plows and spinning jennies, the Berkshire Fairs combined instruction with entertainment in a dramatic fashion. It was this fair that became the prototype for the agricultural fairs that spread across Western Massachusetts and the Hudson valley – 114 by 1820, with most in New England.¹⁹ In 1820, New York City began to take notice of

¹⁷ M.M. Noah, *An Address delivered before the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen of the City of New York on the Opening of the Mechanic Institution*, by M.M. Noah, Esq. A Member of the Mechanics' Society. To which is added the remarks made at the request of the Mechanics' Society on Laying the Corner Stone of that Edifice, by Thomas R. Mercein, A Member of the Society (New York: William A. Mercein, 1822).

¹⁸ John P. Kennedy, "Sixth Annual Address," *Journal of the American Institute*, 1 (June 1836), 61.

¹⁹ Fred Kniffen, "The American Agricultural Fair: The Pattern," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 39 (Dec. 1949): 264-67. See also Fred Kniffen, "The American Agricultural Fair: Time and Place," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 41 (March 1951): 43; see also Catherine E. Kelly, "'The Consummation of Rural Prosperity and Happiness': New England Agricultural Fairs and the Construction of Class and Gender, 1810-1860," *American Quarterly* 49 (Sep. 1997): 574-602.

the fairs and two years later, *The American Farmer* reported the first agricultural fair in Philadelphia county.²⁰ The men of the Franklin Institute and American Institute both had plenty of time to absorb these events and note that the bigger fairs attracted tens of thousands of people.²¹ Marrying their economic objectives to promote the tariff and their patriotic aspirations to show off America's productive prowess while educating mechanics and consumers, the organizers of the two Institutions each created spectacular, politically pointed, annual exhibitions of American domestic manufactures.

The Institutes' exhibitions displayed goods that "delighted" the visitors. The great room of the Masonic Hall in New York, which housed the American Institute's exhibition in 1829, apparently made "the eyes of the patriot sparkle with delight when considering the march of his country to independence – for it was [t]here shown that the means for war or comforts of peace might be furnished with the labor of American hands."²² The report made by *Niles Weekly Register* a pro-tariff publication, noted with glee that even the newspapers of New York that opposed the tariff as a policy were enthralled by the exhibition. *Niles Weekly Register* reprinted a variety of descriptions of the exhibit, including stories of the water powered looms, tended by a "very pretty girl," the walls festooned with swaths of satinets and calicoes, painted glass hanging in the windows sending down shafts of colored light onto the American made silver ware and Britannia ware below. Above all, emphasizing the Institutes patriotic mission combined with their support of the tariff, there was a gilded and garlanded temple, consecrated to

²⁰ For New York, see *The Plough Boy, and Journal of the Board of Agriculture*, Nov. 25, 1820; for Philadelphia see *The American Farmer*, Feb. 1, 1822.

²¹ *The Plough Boy, and Journal of the Board of Agriculture*, Nov. 25, 1820.

²² An article from the *Niles Weekly Register* gave a full account of the fair and re-published the responses of four other newspapers, two of which were noted for their anti-tariff position. See *Nile's Weekly Register*, Oct. 31, 1829.

the memory of Alexander Hamilton.²³ If the Institutes' goals had seemed familiar to New Yorkers and Philadelphians, their methods surprised and delighted their new constituents. By 1830, the American Institute estimated that they had entertained over 30,000 people and taken \$1526.73 in ticket sales.²⁴

Like the societies that had come before them, the Franklin and American Institutes were also founded and organized for the most part by highly educated and wealthy mechanics. The Franklin Institute's organizing committee in 1824 had included Samuel V. Merrick, James Ronaldson, Adam Ramage, Thomas Fletcher and William Hypolitus Keating.²⁵ Merrick had become a mechanic by accident. Born in Hallowell, Maine, into a family of merchants, he had moved to Philadelphia in 1816 to work for his wine-merchant uncle Samuel Vaughan. During Merrick's apprenticeship, his uncle had acquired a workshop for making steam fire engines, and utterly uninterested, had passed the running of it over to Merrick. Merrick made a quick success of it and by 1836 had established the Southwark Foundry at 4th and Washington. This foundry flourished, making fire engines, municipal gas equipment and heavy machinery. By the end of his life, Merrick was the first president of the Pennsylvania Railroad.²⁶ James Ronaldson was also in the metal working business. Along with Abraham Binny, he was the owner of a Philadelphia type foundry and supplied some of Philadelphia's leading newspapermen with the type they used to print their newsheets, including William Duane and John Poulson. Ronaldson and Binny had also owned Columbian Pottery between 1808 and

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Report of the Executive Committee on the Subject of the Fair July 1st 1830*, Box 75, Folder 2, American Institute Collection, N-YHS; "Reports and Papers 1827-1838," Box 1, Folder 4, American Institute Collection, N-YHS.

²⁵ "Minute Book of the Committee on Premiums and Exhibitions of the Franklin Institute 1824-25," *The Records of the Committee on Science and the Arts of the Franklin Institute*, Text-fiche 208-A-1 to 208 E-2.

²⁶ Andrew Dawson, *Lives of Philadelphia Engineers: Capital Class and Revolution, 1830-1890* (London: Ashgate, 2004), 21, 84, 97, 118.

1814, a time when restrictions on British imports made it easier to sell American made pots and earthenware. Acquainted with some of the leading luminaries of the protectionist movement, including Mathew Carey and Hezekiah Niles, Ronaldson had plenty of reasons to become interested in manufacturing societies. Small wonder then, that he was a supporter of the Franklin Institute's goals.²⁷

Ronaldson was acquainted with Adam Ramage through his business transactions. Ramage, a printer's joiner and cabinet maker, had made rulers and composing sticks for Ronaldson's foundry, as well as a coffin for Abraham Binny's first wife Elizabeth.²⁸ Ramage was well known in Philadelphia for his skills as a carpenter, and would later have a printing press named after a model he created. Thomas Fletcher was also a successful craftsman. A silversmith, who during the War of 1812 had made pieces of commemorative silver plate to celebrate American naval victories, he was a well established business owner by 1824.²⁹ The only man on the initial committee who did not fit the category of successful urban mechanic was William H. Keating. Keating was a University of Pennsylvania alumnus, who had graduated in 1816 and returned in 1822 to join the faculty of the Chemistry and Mineralogy department. Keating certainly had the most experience in participating in urban educative institutes. He was an active member

²⁷ See William Duane to Binny and Ronaldson, Feb. 9, 1808, Box 1, Folder 19; John Poulson to Binny and Ronaldson, June 14, 1811, Box 1, Folder 43; Mathew Carey to Binny and Ronaldson, Apr. 2, 1805, Box 1, Folder 7; Hezekiah Niles to Binny and Ronaldson, Jan. 28, 1820, Box 1, Folder 39 all in the Binny and Ronaldson Papers, (McA. MSS 006) McAllister Collection, Library Company of Philadelphia, on deposit at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (hereafter HSP). For a useful biography of Ronaldson see the short description of his life included in the HSP finding aid.

²⁸ Adam Ramage, Bill to James Ronaldson, Oct 20, 1812; Adam Ramage, Bill to James Ronaldson, Jan 5, 1815, Box 1, Folder 70, Binny and Ronaldson Papers, HSP.

²⁹ Elizabeth Ingerman Wood, "Thomas Fletcher: A Philadelphia Entrepreneur of Presentation Silver" *Winterthur Portfolio*, 3 (1967): 136-171.

of both the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia and the American Philosophical Society.³⁰

The American Institute had a slightly more politically oriented membership. James Tallmadge, the president of the Institute, had been educated at Brown University and worked as lawyer for Governor Clinton of New York. Having served in the War of 1812, he was a member of Congress until 1819, during which time he authored the controversial Tallmadge Amendment, which prohibited the further admittance of slaves into Missouri. He went on to serve as a delegate to the state constitutional convention in 1821 and 1846, was a member of the state assembly and finally was Lieutenant Governor of New York between 1824 and 1826. By the time he joined the board of the American Institute in 1828, his political support of tariff and the American System was well established and as a former politician he believed in effecting change through government institutions.³¹ Tallmadge was joined by a number of powerful urban mechanics. Vice-president Clarkson Crolus Jr. came from a long line of successful New York potters. However, Crolus, like his father before him, had his ties to the New York political scene and had served in the New York Senate.³² These kinds of connections certainly predisposed the American Institute to push more stringently for tariff legislation, whereas the Franklin Institute, although attuned to re-enforcing political support for the tariff, was always more interested in the promotion and diffusion of knowledge.

³⁰ Biography from the notes in the finding aid: William H. Keating, "Account Books" American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

³¹ "James Tallmadge" www.bioguide.congress.gov [accessed March 13, 2009].

³² See John Ramsay, *American Potters and Pottery* (Read Books, 2008), 55 and Craig Hanyan and Mary L. Hanyan *De Witt Clinton and the Rise of the People's Men* (Montreal: McGill – Queens' University Press, 1996), 126.

In practical terms both Institutes worked to promote manufacturing by providing manufacturers and mechanics with new technological information. Apart from the annual exhibitions of American made goods, this was done through the collection of new models of machinery that were on display for members, providing mechanics with access to a library, furnishing lecture series on topics of interest and publishing journals with information on the latest techniques in various lines of production. As members, the Institutes hoped to attract men like the founders themselves – artisans, mechanics and professionals. By the 1820s this was necessarily a broad category. As the modes of production began to change in America and craftsmen and artisans were joined by the owners of larger workshops and factories that produced textiles, pottery and glass, the Institutes believed they had to seek a wide range of male producers to reflect that shift.³³

A humorous toast made at the Franklin Institute dinner suggested as much:

Our noble selves, viz: Type founders and printers, who are men of *letters*; architects who *build up* the country's fame; chemists who *retort* nothing but kindness; *lists* of tailors whose patriotism is without *measure*; saddlers who do good without *end*; coppersmiths who are better *still*; enginemakers, who erect a *horse power* for the public good; paper makers, who do more if re-*quired*; glaziers, whose *panes* are always to please; a *band* of hatters, who assist to *lower a crown*; bakers, the best *bred* and who keep clear of John Doe; brick makers of the old *stock*, made of *well tempered clay*; carpenters and masons, who have climbed the *ladders* of their professions; painters who are sober, though *well primed*; coopers, who in new improvements *chime in*; gunmakers, who at science *never go off half cocked*; joiners, who are *glued* to our cause; weavers, who in American manufactures *loom large*, smiths whose forgeries would pass at the mint; dyers of all colours *alive* at their work; doctors who *attend gratis* to their public duties; lawyers, who *try to suit our cause*; and *awl* the cordwainers, who come out best at the *last*. *Nine cheers*.³⁴

Significantly this list did not include wage laborers, either men or women, nor was it intended to do so. The Institutes' hope was to foster a gentleman-mechanic, a

³³ An excellent discussion of this changing category can be found in Peskin, *Manufacturing Revolution*, 139-161.

³⁴ Peter A. Browne gave the toast which is reprinted in Sinclair, *Philadelphia's Philosopher Mechanics*, 41. See also "List of Members," *Franklin Institute First Annual Report*, 18-25.

complementary figure to Jefferson's independent yeoman farmer.³⁵ To this end annual membership fees were \$3.00 but a sum of \$25.00 could make one a member for life. For the visitors to the annual exhibition, the charge was far less. Twenty-five cents would buy a ticket to the American Institute fair in 1831 that would admit one gentleman and two ladies.³⁶ But this practical approach to improving American manufacturing by educating the mechanics and manufacturers themselves was only part of what the Institutes set themselves to do. They also worked to persuade the public that manufacturing in America was not the corrupting influence that it was in Europe.

By the late 1820s, this was a more complicated task than it had been in 1810, when Tench Coxe had found American manufacturing still unable to compete with British factories and much of America's production still took place in smaller workshops or in the case of textile production at home. By the late 1820s, there was more manufacturing done in America and more of it looked like the kind that occurred in Britain. In 1813 the first fully integrated textile mill had opened in Waltham, Massachusetts and by the 1820s this experiment had matured into the Merrimack Manufacturing Company, a complex of textile mills situated along the Merrimack River. By 1828 the Lowell Corporation was running a textile factory that resembled many of the British factories that Americans feared. Long monotonous hours for women workers who lived in burgeoning mill towns was a sight that some Americans had hoped never to see. Of course the model of Lowell was not the only mode of production. Cotton mills at Rockdale in Pennsylvania were marginally less threatening to the elite anti-manufacturing contingent, since they were a little less rigidly structured. Yet they were

³⁵ Sinclair, *Philadelphia's Philosopher Mechanics*, 15.

³⁶ *Franklin Institute First Annual Report*, 7. On ticket for admission see "Rule and Regulations to be Observed During the Fair," Box 75, Folder 2, American Institute Collection, N-YHS.

still sites of factory labor. More common in the 1820s were the large number of smaller, specialized workshops that sprang up in Philadelphia and New York. In Philadelphia, highly specialized textile workshops sprung up in Manayunk, along the narrow banked Schuylkill River, where workers could run their own loom and combine that work with handwork as well, thus adhering to an older tradition of manufacturing work as craft. In New York, small workshops also predominated, although no longer adhering to the artisanal apprentice structure and relying more and more on women's work to sustain production.³⁷

As a result, the men of the Institutes set themselves to the task of persuading the public that these developing branches of manufacturing could still sustain a political economy that was specifically American. Men like Edward Everett, who spoke to the assembled crowd of fair goers at the American Institute's fourth annual fair in 1831, tried to assuage popular fears that domestic manufacturing would lead to high prices, a declining revenue due to a lack of import tax and the death of international trade hubs such as Boston and New York, by proving since 1819 those calamities had not come about. Even more importantly he could claim that "our manufacturing establishments, instead of providing seminaries of vice...are honorably distinguished for order and

³⁷ For a year by year account of the development of manufacturing see Bishop, *A History of American Manufactures from 1608 to 1860*. The secondary literature on this topic is extensive. For the best examples see Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); Philip Scranton, *Proprietary Capitalism: Textile Manufacture at Philadelphia 1800-1885* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983); Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* 3rd ed. (1982; repr., Chicago: Illini, 1987); Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

morality,” thus disproving the most deeply held fear that manufacturing would corrupt American society and in particular create a dangerous working class rabble.³⁸

Instead, the Institutes promised that manufacturing establishments could produce virtuous, hard-working citizens whose very efforts would become the basis of a stronger nation. This was a powerful promise for the middling and wealthy sorts in urban societies that feared the establishment of a permanent class of degraded dependent wage laborers in their communities. In both cities, but especially New York, the expansion of the slums, crowded with migrant and immigrant wage laborers, presented a threatening sight.³⁹ Painting a picture of possibility, Edward Kennedy, a member of the American Institute, argued that manufacturing would produce a valuable internal infrastructure that would draw the far flung members of the United States into closer proximity. “The common inheritance of American citizens,” he argued “[was] rendered more valuable by the vast increase of towns, roads, public works, fortifications and navies” that would come about as a result of domestic manufacturing and internal commerce. But beyond that he claimed “our **UNION** is corroborated, cherished and perpetuated in the affections and interests of the people.”⁴⁰

The claim that manufacturing could bond the Union together lay at the heart of what the Institutes hoped they could do for manufacturing. In 1824, promoting manufacturing as a national concern had seemed within the realm of possibility, as Andrew Jackson came out in favor of a tariff in the presidential campaign, and in 1828

³⁸ Edward Everett, *Address Delivered Before the American Institute of the City of New York at Their Fourth Annual Fair, October 14 1831* (New York: Van Norden and Mason, 1831), 38.

³⁹ Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 107-141.

⁴⁰ John P Kennedy, *An Address Delivered Before the American Institute at Chatham-Street Chapel in the City of New York October 17th 1833* (New York: George F. Hopkins & Son, 44 Nassau St., 1833), 25.

went on to win the election.⁴¹ But by 1832, both Institutes were engaged in a passionate political fight as John Calhoun, representative of South Carolina, threatened to nullify the new tariff of 1828 and defy the power of the federal government. In those four years, the issue of the tariff came close to splitting the nation and the men of the Institutes faced a daunting task. In order to garner support for the tariff, and manufacturing more generally, they not only had to convince the public that manufacturing could foster an American political economy, and that the manufacturer himself could be a virtuous independent citizen. They also had to drain manufacturing interests of all sectional meaning, elevating it to a national cause.

To achieve this the Institutes attempted to re-fashion the story of the American Revolution, turning manufacturers from the servile imitators of the British economy into patriots, men whose work helped the nation fight for the ultimate freedom. The Institutes defined this as the freedom from the oppressive effects of the British stranglehold on the colonial economy. As Everett claimed, Americans had “gone to war for goods not names.”⁴² The Revolution, in their eyes, was more than a war over forms of government; it had been a war about livelihoods and material life. Failure to ensure that Americans could live independent of British production, meant in their reckoning, that the Revolution had been a failure at a fundamental level. As Henry Baldwin, speaker at the seventh annual fair of 1834 in New York put it in his final poetical flourish of the night:

“That the warrior’s name,
Tho’ pealed and chimed on all the tongues of fame,
Sounds less harmonious to the grateful mind

⁴¹ Eiselen, *The Rise of Pennsylvania Protectionism*, 64-68.

⁴² Edward Everett *Address Delivered Before the American Institute of the City of New York at Their Fourth Annual Fair* (1831) p 25 See also Caleb Cushing, ‘Annual Address at the Ninth Annual Fair’ *Journal of the American Institute* Vol. 2 No. 2 (Nov 1836) p 61

Than his who fashions and improves mankind”⁴³

This martial rhetoric became a keystone of the early efforts of the Institutes to valorize manufacturing. By juxtaposing the mechanic with the soldier, the Institutes hoped to inspire a national passion and pride for domestic manufacturing, glamorizing its status by affiliating its work with the vigorous masculinity of the republican citizen soldier.

Not only did the Institutes place manufacturing at the center of the American narrative, they also argued that encouraging domestic manufacturing was the only way to sustain the American experiment in democracy. Promoting the protected American industries as sites where men could labor for a fair wage, members of the Institutes attempted to frame the opponents of protection as the opponents of the hard working independent American man.⁴⁴ In 1831, James Tallmadge, speaking as president of the American Institute, outlined the horrific conditions for workers in Europe. Describing desperate uprisings and brutal suppressions in English mill towns, the depraved domestic lives of female mill workers in Birmingham and Manchester, and the starving Irish families, who were forced by poor wages to live off seaweed and cattle blood, he argued that to buy European goods was in effect an endorsement of this atrocious system of

⁴³ Henry Baldwin Anniversary Address Delivered Before the American Institute of the City of New York at the Chatham Street Chapel October 9, 1834 During the Seventh Annual Fair (New York: Office of the Mechanics' Magazine, No 35 Wall Street, 1834) p 6-7

⁴⁴ The only industry which the American Institute acknowledged female labor was in the semi-agricultural work of sericulture. The growth of mulberry trees, the harvesting of the leaves and the upkeep and harvesting of silkworms output was described as pleasant pastoral labor that men and women could do together. The promotion of sericulture was a passion for both Institutes, who hoped domestic silk production would reduce the U.S. dependence on French silk. See *Journal of the American Institute* 1 (Apr. 1836): 335; *Journal of the American Institute* 4 (Oct. 1838): 24-5; *Documents in Relation to the Manufacture of Silk and of Cotton and Woollen Goods in the City of New York* (New York: James Van Norden, 1844), Box 466, American Institute Collection, N-YHS. The Franklin Institute was also very interested in promoting sericulture, even noting the production of an American flag made out of American silk that was presented to Congress as part of petition to protect silk production. See *Franklin Institute Report of the Committee* (1830) and Franklin Institute, *Report of the Committee on Premiums and Exhibitions of the Franklin Institute... October 1842*, ([Philadelphia?], 1842).

production. His deepest scorn was reserved for the men “blessed with an American birth, who can clamor against his own government, about ‘Free Trade,’ and by withholding just encouragement and protection to domestic industry reduce the *freemen* of this country, to an unequal competition with the mendicant mobs of Europe suffering *without liberty* and *without bread*.”⁴⁵ Tallmadge created a neat circle of causation: by buying foreign goods and failing to demand protection for American manufacturers, Americans laid themselves open to charges of inhumanity and lack of moral judgment, as well as the unpatriotic act of undermining the freedom of their fellow citizens, shattering the promise of equality on which America rested.

But if Tallmadge appeared to address his concerns to the widest possible audience, in reality the political situation of the early 1830s meant that these criticisms were in fact reserved for the “free traders,” the politicians and merchants who placed pressure on President Jackson to abolish America’s protective tariff. For both the Institutes, but for the American Institute in particular, the wider ideology of promoting domestic manufacturing as a national enterprise underlined a very practical political campaign to ensure that protectionism remained a central plank of American economic policy.⁴⁶ This political lobbying reveals an importance facet of the Institutes’ approach to political economy in the 1830s. Rather than focus their efforts on a broadly conceived

⁴⁵ James Tallmadge, *Address of Gen. Tallmadge Delivered Before the American Institute of the City of New York at Clinton Hall, August 1831* (New York: John M. Danforth, 1831). See also Tristram Burges M.C., *Address Delivered Before the American Institute of the City of New York at the Third Annual Fair Held at the Masonic Hall, October 1830* (New York: John M. Danforth, 1830); ‘The Eleventh Annual Address,’ *Journal of the American Institute*, 4 (Oct. 1838) 12-29, and Thomas P. Jones, M.D. *An Address on the Progress of Manufactures and Internal Improvement in the United States; and particularly, on the Advantages to be Derived from the Employment of Slaves in the Manufacturing of Cotton and Other Goods. Delivered in the Hall of the Franklin Institute, November 6th 1827* (Philadelphia: Judah Dobson, 1827).

⁴⁶ *Remonstrance of the American Institute of the City of New York Against the Bill for Reducing the Revenue, Reported by the Committee of Ways and Means of the House of Representatives of the United States* (New York, 1833), Box 466, American Institute Collection, N-YHS.

consumer (who after all, Tallmadge could have held responsible for purchasing European goods), each Institute chose instead to focus on the federal legislature, believing that it was the American government who was responsible for ensuring that the economy reflected the values of the American polity.⁴⁷

The focus on the producer, the nurturing of American manufacturing and the effort to push the federal government to constantly alter the tariff to further protect American industry was the heart of the Institutes' goals throughout the 1820s and 1830s. While the Institute men acknowledged that the consumer had a part to play, this was not their first interest. In fact, neither Institutes gave much thought to the consumer, a figure whom they imagined as both impressionable and obedient. Indeed, both organizations adopted the attitude that the consumer was an individual who required protection. Citizens, they pointed out, required shielding from the unregulated marketplace, which the Institutes characterized as both unnatural and destructive, a characterization which reflected their wish to have the government to step in and regulate the marketplace. But, the men of the Institutes argued, citizens also required protection from themselves. Turning to recent history, the American Institute highlighted the economic conditions that had followed the War of 1812 to demonstrate why the consumer needed to be protected from their own impulses. A massive influx of foreign goods, had meant unnaturally low prices and this coupled with rapidly spiraling credit availability, meant that Americans found it possible to purchase, though not afford, goods they wanted but did not need. "There are temptations," the American Institute argued, "which experience shows it is not in human nature to withstand; and the temptation to abuse credit, when it is procured too

⁴⁷ While the American Institute chose to lobby directly the Franklin Institute was more circumspect, choosing to hold its annual exhibition in 1831 at the same time that the Free Trade convention gathered in Philadelphia that year. See "Life in Philadelphia" *The Ariel*, Oct. 15, 1831.

easily, never has, nor never will cure itself ... wisdom has dictated the expediency of legal preventatives and rigorous penalties.”⁴⁸ Clearly, the Institutes understood the citizen to be in the care of the government and hoped that tariff coupled with an education in what to buy would enable consumers to behave in a responsible and patriotic way.

In accordance with this policy, the Institutes tried to counsel consumers on what and how to buy, throughout the 1830s. Particularly as the crisis over the Tariff of Abominations slipped away and the Institutes began to feel secure in the ascendancy of protectionism, the exhibitions began to serve a dual purpose. Not only did they demonstrate national unity and prowess but they also began to act as a school for consumers. As John P. Kennedy, describing the American Institute’s fair in 1833 argued:

“[T]his exhibition may be properly denominated a miniature of the whole, - a card of samples taken from the great storehouse of our country...the moral essence is present; and there may the patriot citizen take his children, and, from that volume read them the lesson that shall teach them to be proud of their country, to love it, and after times to pursue its good...it would teach him that the glory of America is not to be measured by the finical pretensions of the drawing room...but chiefly, and most adequately, by the intrinsic vigor of our working people...that transmutes the gross elements of the earth into something of value.”⁴⁹

The Institutes assumed that by nurturing production through tariffs, they could make available all the American goods a consumer could want. What these desires were, the Institutes’ officers left more obscure. But the rejection of the “finical pretensions of the drawing room” and the encouragement of coarse cloths, iron and steel and industrial equipment, suggests that both Institutes initially shied away from the fancy goods and objects of refinement that in earlier decades had been labeled as luxurious and wanton by anti-manufacturing Republicans. Instead, they tried to maintain a distance from these

⁴⁸ *Report of a Special Committee of the American Institute on the Subject of Cash Duties, the Auction System &c. January 12 1829* (New York: J.M. Danforth, Printer, Evening City Gazette Office, 1829).

⁴⁹ John P. Kennedy, *An Address Delivered Before the American Institute at Chatham-Street Chapel in the City of New York* (New York, 1833), 9.

items at an official level, imagining that visitors to the exhibits were not buying to decorate a home but were purchasing the materials to stock a business or run a workshop. Thus the Institutes imagined consumers through a producerist lens. The men of the Institutes also assumed that consumers presented with the possibility of buying American would automatically do so. This belief allowed the Institutes to envision a political economy where material prosperity came to every citizen as a result of a republican government's nurturing policy.

As it turned out, these assumptions were challenged in every way by the very constituents the Institutes had hoped to persuade. Mechanics and manufacturers refused to imagine American consumers as helpless vulnerable individuals. Instead, these producers saw their customers as selective and discerning, individuals who needed to be enticed and persuaded to buy American goods. The consumers themselves forced the Institutes to reconsider their views as it became increasingly clear that they would not unthinkingly buy American. Moreover, the mechanics, small time manufacturers and female fancy workers who provided the bulk of exhibited goods, refused to conform to the Institutes' plan of promoting only coarse fabrics, utilitarian goods and heavy industrial materials and bombarded the organizers with lavish domestic furnishings and delicate decorative items. Although the depositors' intentions may have been simply to gain a more steady foothold in an expanding marketplace, by speaking though the Institutes in this way, the producers of Philadelphia and New York forced the Institutes to reconsider the place and meaning of highly finished fancy goods in America's political economy.

The first surprise the Institutes received was the intense interest that producers had in using the fairs to cultivate new consumers, rather than using the exhibits to improve their own technical skills. In particular, the smaller scale manufacturers valued the esteem that came with an Institute premium. In 1836, P.G Nagle, a maker of waterproof leather boots, wrote to the American Institute in despair, begging that they send him a new copy of his award diploma. His boisterous children had accidentally ripped up his old one and since he was now planning to start a new business in New York, the diploma would give him the credibility with consumers he needed to be successful. James Davis also contacted the institute that same year, asking that his award be sent on to him, commenting “I prefer the Diploma to a medal, inasmuch as the former can be displayed before the Public, while the latter would only be as an occasion by Display.”⁵⁰

Clearly, the awards the Institute distributed were much more than rubber stamps. They allowed mechanics to better sell their goods in a competitive market, and manufacturers and artisans were unlikely to dismiss the importance of that advantage. Some lobbied for superior exhibition space in order to have their goods better displayed and others wrote in advance to check on the judging committees, in order to discern if there was any bias that would place them at a disadvantage. None took the chance of winning the Institutes’ seal of approval lightly. Indeed, Mr. G. Wade, a New York wig maker, claimed that if the Judges refused to allow his (admittedly late) entry into the fair, the decision would be “a death blow, to his most sanguine hopes.” He continued with the obsequious yet probably accurate observation that it was “highly beneficial to a Man in

⁵⁰ P.G. Nagle to T.B Wakeman, June 27, 1836; James Davis to T.B Wakeman, June 8, 1836, Box 75, Folder 16, American Institute Collection, N-YHS.

Business as particularly a Young beginner, [to gain] so flattering a mark of distinction, as a Diploma from the American Institute.”⁵¹

All of these producers hoped to entice the fair-going consumer with their exhibits of highly finished manufactured goods, a trend that baffled the committee members of the Institutes. After the Franklin Institute’s fair closed in 1830, the exhibition committee lamented that manufacturers were “turning their attention chiefly to cloths of a moderate price, which they [were] unwilling to send to an exhibition where they apprehend that they might be brought into comparison with higher price goods.” Urging the manufacturers to send in their efforts the committee continued “[g]oods of all qualities with the price annexed will always be cheerfully received and judged accordingly.” Yet in a statement that revealed the extent to which the committee had misjudged their urban audience, the Franklin Institute committee emphasized, “[t]he Institute is aware that in a country like ours, the demand for high priced articles must always be limited and the intelligent manufacturer will generally look to a coarser article for a more safe and extensive market.”⁵² Yet “coarse goods” were not what the participants in the annual exhibitions seemed to have in mind. The producers that sent their goods to the exhibitions had a different vision of the American marketplace in mind.

No single group defied the Institutes’ vision of a utilitarian marketplace more than the female producers of fancy work and fashion.⁵³ Despite the fact that the organizers of the exhibitions showed no initial interest in their products, women flooded the exhibition

⁵¹ G. Wade to T.B Wakeman, n.d (1832?), Box 1, Folder 5, American Institute Collection, N-YHS.

⁵² *Franklin Institute Report of the Committee on Premiums and Exhibitions* (1830), 6-7

⁵³ Fancywork was originally a term used to distinguish between plain sewing, such as mending or basting, and fancy sewing or decorative needlework. By the mid 18th century, the term fancywork had expanded to include working with media such as rice, feathers and human hair, to construct a variety of decorative items that were intended to adorn the home, from lamp mats to figurines and shrines. See Nancy Dunlap Bercaw, “Solid Objects/Mutable Meanings: Fancywork and the Construction of Bourgeois Culture,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 26 (Winter, 1991): 233-4.

tables with a wide range of handicrafts of their own making. These included beadwork lamp mats, lace table cloths, wax flowers and quilted bedspreads, as well as a range of straw hats, knitted stockings and embroidered children's clothes. Organizers tried to discourage these women. They refused to offer prizes in this category of fancy goods, and when they finally gave in, the organizers rarely awarded the more prestigious silver medal, handing out diplomas instead.⁵⁴ But the goods garnered a lot of interest and the Institutes had to acknowledge the popularity of these items. This fact was reflected by the American Institutes' decision to double the number of prizes it awarded in the category of fancy goods between 1836 and 1847. The list of honors jumped in one decade from 44 to 82.⁵⁵ Nor could the organizers refuse these items, since as American-made goods they were in theory encouraged by their own mission statement. Thus when one Mr. Fairlie wrote on behalf of Miss Loomis of 28 Bleecker Street to say she had "two bonnets of her own making" that she wanted entered into the up coming fair, there was little the organizers could do but accept.⁵⁶

What made the matter even more complicated was the fact that some of these women clearly hoped to enter into the marketplace on the same terms as the male producers of market commodities. Americans in the 1820s and 30s were familiar with the sale of handicrafts at fundraising bazaars, anti-slavery fairs and even on occasion agricultural shows but these venues were to all intents and purposes defined as separate

⁵⁴ Despite the Franklin Institute's initial dislike of the fancywork by 1845 the Institute not only had a separate category for fancy goods, they had formed a committee of women to judge it. See *Franklin Institute Sixteenth Exhibition of American Manufactures, Held in the City of Philadelphia, from the 20th to the 31st of October inclusive, 1846 by the Franklin Institute of the State of Pennsylvania, for the Promotion of the Mechanic Arts. From the Journal of the Franklin Institute* (Philadelphia, 1846), 2.

⁵⁵ See "List of Premiums" *Journal of the American Institute* 2 (Nov. 1836), Box 466, American Institute Collection, N-YHS and "List of Premiums" *Journal of the American Institute* 13 (Oct. 1847), American Institute Collection N-YHS.

⁵⁶ Mr. Fairlie to T.B Wakeman, Oct. 14, 1836, Folder 15, Box 75, American Institute Collection, N-YHS.

niche markets and were not intended to represent the larger whole.⁵⁷ It was a different scenario to have women depositing their “frivolous” goods in a marketplace that was not only supposed to represent a republican nation, but was also supposed to confirm the link between production and citizenship. These women, though welcomed as spectators, could not expect to stand side by side with the mechanics who were the manufacturing equivalent of the yeoman farmer. Had the Institutes been able to dismiss these goods as nice examples of a productive hobby they may have had less difficulty. But it is clear that some women intended their efforts to be judged as saleable goods.

A survey of the winners of fancy good premiums at the American Institute in 1836, for example, reveals that at least 6 out of 27 women were not simply producing these fancy goods for their own amusement but with an eye to making a profit. These six women were listed as business owners in Longworth’s New York City Directory.⁵⁸ They included a dealer in ready made linens, an artificial florist, a maker of baby linens, a baker, a fancy goods retailer and a milliner. Why these women, among many others, chose to enter their goods into the exhibition is a matter for speculation. They could have desired the prestige that came along with the award. As businesswomen they would have known that an Institute award came with a certain caché that could boost business and attract consumers. Perhaps after all they did it for their own personal satisfaction and a sense of achievement. But the public context of these exhibitions was widely reported in newspapers. They would have been aware that the exhibitions were also an exercise in

⁵⁷ See Kelly “The Consummation of Rural Prosperity,” and also Beverly Gordon. *Bazaars and Fair Ladies : The History of the American Fundraising Fair* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998).

⁵⁸ There were 43 winners in this category overall but only 27 were women from New York city. See Thomas Longworth, *Longworth’s American Almanac and New York City Register and City Directory* (New York: Thomas Longworth, 1836.) The entries were: G. Vultee, 686, Mary Hawk, 314, Julia Jacobs, 354, Margaret Ross, 576, Schulz and Bleidon, 588 and Catherine Nichols.

patriotism and were freighted in political meaning. It is not impossible then that these women hoped to support an independent American marketplace in their own way, albeit a slightly different vision of the one the Institutes had in mind. They might also have hoped to emphasize their own patriotism as producing citizens of a republic. Whatever their motivations, it was their efforts in part that finally forced the Institutes to alter their vision of the ideal American marketplace.

By the late 1830s the work of women, as well as other producers, forced Institute organizers to acknowledge the centrality of finished fancy goods in the American marketplace, despite the old associations these goods had with aristocratic luxury. Turning their back on the problem of luxury altogether, the Institutes proclaimed that these goods signaled domestic comfort. The ascendance of comfort was trumpeted as a reflection of America's success as a nation. In 1837, speaking at the American Institute's annual fair Professor C. Mason announced that "the thrifty farmer can well afford the luxury of seeing his wife and daughter in their improved condition...if his household affairs are prudently managed."⁵⁹ This improved condition was access to domestic comforts, such as carpets, pianos and porcelain tableware. These goods, Mason said, promoted "intellectual culture and refin[ed] the manners." As a result the Institutes began to endorse this kind of luxury, but only when consumed for the benefit of the domestic sphere. By drawing this distinction, the organizers of the Institutes believed they could remove the stigma surrounding luxury items.

This shift culminated in the late 1840s, coinciding with the women's barrage of fancywork goods and household items. By this point the Institutes had completely

⁵⁹ Prof. C. Mason, *The Oration Before the American Institute*, 2nd ed. (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1840), 19-20. See also Rev. Orville Dewey, "Annual Address," *American Institute Journal*, 3 (Oct. 1837), 4.

reversed their earlier aversion to luxury to the point where they could actually frame it as a necessity in a republican nation. As Joseph Chandler said to the crowds gathered at the 17th Franklin Institute exhibition in 1847 “ [t]hose, then, who in this country are...transfusing into the lower classes... the wants of refinement are ministering to the diffusion and maintenance of true republicanism.”⁶⁰ A universal desire for refined consumer goods, accompanied by open access to them within the marketplace, argued Chandler, leveled out society, thus instituting republican relations between the people. Since it was the people that constituted the republican character of the government, this was the ideal situation.

The turn away from industrial goods to finished manufactured products as the output best suited to the American political economy was accompanied by a turnaround on the character of the consumer as well. By the mid 1840s, the Institutes could no longer assert that consumers were helpless individuals who required protection from the marketplace nor could they imagine them as the male purchasers of industrial goods who were seeking to outfit a workshop. Instead, they acknowledged that consumers were headstrong individuals, who felt entitled to seek out these fancy goods and felt no obligation to support American labor. As James Tallmadge, President of the American Institute, noted in 1843, “[it] is a matter of regret and public injustice, that in departments in which our mechanics had attained much excellence, their productions were often sent to market, and sold to consumers, under labels of Italian, French or English

⁶⁰ Joseph R Chandler, *Address Delivered at the Close of the Seventeenth Exhibition of American Manufactures Held by the Franklin Institute of the State of Pennsylvania for the Promotion of the Mechanic Arts, October 1847* (Philadelphia: Franklin Institute, 1847), 10.

manufacture... many thousand such labels were printed in this city.”⁶¹ Clearly, consumers required a patriotic education, to push them to buy American. The tariff alone had improved America’s domestic manufactures, but as Tallmadge now clearly saw, the consumer could not be persuaded to buy American made goods in the name of supporting domestic manufacturing alone. Thus, instead of pedaling the patriotism of a good’s production, the Institutes began to focus on the ways in which a good’s design and style could reflect the values and habits of the American consumer and inspire them to buy at home rather than abroad. For the first time, the Institutes began to acknowledge the market value of taste and design in their quest to shape the buying habits of Americans.⁶²

This shift ultimately manifested itself in the opening of the Franklin Institute School of Design for Women in 1850. This venture was the brainchild of Sarah Peters, the wife of a diplomat and a woman who used her high society connections to enlist wide support amongst Philadelphia’s business philanthropists such as William “Pig Iron” Kelley, and prominent American women, including Sarah Josepha Hale and Catherine Beecher.⁶³ The School of Design was in many ways a logical step for the Franklin Institute. As Peters noted, while the cheapness of American goods enticed some customers, Americans still looked for fashion abroad. “[We are] still compelled to depend

⁶¹ James Tallmadge, *Address Delivered at the Close of the Sixteenth Annual Fair of the American Institute Held at Niblo’s Saloon New York, October 1843*, 2nd ed. (New York: James Van Norden & Co, 1843), 19.

⁶² On the American Institute, see James J. Mapes, *Address Delivered at the Opening of the 18th Annual Fair of the American Institute at Niblo’s Garden, Tuesday October 7th 1845* (New York: James Van Norden & Co., 1845), 6. On the Franklin Institute, see *Open Letter from Thomas Braidwood, September 9th, 1853*, Box entitled: “Committee on Instruction, School of Design for Women 1850-1853, Miscellaneous Schools,” Folder 10, Franklin Institute Archives, Franklin Institute, Philadelphia (hereafter FIA); F. Graeme Chalmers, “The Early History of the Philadelphia School of Design” *Journal of Design History*, 9, no. 4 (1996): 239; and *Franklin Institute Report of the Twenty Second Exhibition of American Manufactures* (Philadelphia: R.W. Barnard, 1852), 17.

⁶³ On Sarah Peters and the origins of the School of Design, see Theodore C. Knauff, *An Experiment in Training for the Useful and the Beautiful: A History* (Philadelphia: The Philadelphia School of Design for Women, 1922), 9-17. See also Nina de Angeli Walls, “Educating Women for Art and Commerce: The Philadelphia School of Design, 1848-1932,” *History of Education Quarterly*, 34 (Autumn 1994): 329-355; and Chalmers, “The Early History of the Philadelphia School of Design for Women,” 237-252.

almost entirely upon foreigners for our designs and patterns,” she complained, “thus exhibiting ourselves rather in light of successful imitators of others than as original inventors. Thus the designs of our articles of furniture, and the patterns of our dresses and other stuffs are rarely anything more than servile imitations of those imported from France and England, which the different habits of life among us, as well as the different climate of our country, render more or less inappropriate to our use, while the existence of this state of things must render us tributary, and so far inferior, to foreign nations.”⁶⁴ This scathing indictment of American consumer goods struck at the heart of the Franklin Institute’s efforts. Peters made it clear that technological capability and manufacturing prowess was not enough to ensure American independence from Europe. In fact, quite the opposite, Peters’ assessment of consumer goods suggested that Americans remained dependent in the worst way possible, still subject to old European habits of life that the Franklin Institute had spent decades trying to overthrow. With the opening of the design school, the Franklin Institute acknowledged the power of the consumer, particularly the female consumer, to shape both the political economy and the nation.

The School’s main purpose was to teach young women how to create new and stylish patterns for calicos and wallpapers that would appeal to consumers who looked for European style in their purchases. In two short decades, the Institutes had shifted their focus from improving the techniques of the weavers and dyers of fabrics to improving the skills of female artists and print makers.⁶⁵ This evolution ultimately suited the members of the Franklin Institute, whose needs had begun to change in these decades. The

⁶⁴ *Copy of the Proceedings of the Franklin Institute of the State of Pennsylvania for the Promotion of Mechanic Arts, Relative to the Establishment for a School of Design for Women*, Box Entitled: “Committee on Instruction, School of Design for Women, Miscellaneous Schools” Folder 1, FIA.

⁶⁵ Sarah Peters, “Report to the Members of the Franklin Institute, Philadelphia May 14th 1851” Box entitled: “Committee on Instruction, School of Design for Women, Miscellaneous Schools” Folder 5, FIA.

involvement of David S. Brown with the Franklin Institute and the School of Design reflects the changing emphasis that the Institutes placed on cultivating Americans' taste. Brown began his professional career as a commission merchant, navigating the highly competitive international and domestic markets of Philadelphia. Working with his brother until 1821, and then with the firm Hacker, Brown and Co. he finally ventured out on his own in 1832, but this time concentrating solely on domestically manufactured goods or what he called "the American business."⁶⁶ As his old partnership dissolved, Brown eagerly sought the loyalty of his contacts, assuring them that his fourteen years in the commission business ensured a valuable knowledge of the domestic market, one that his old partner Hacker did not have. The fact that his decision coincided with the final confrontation over the "Tariff of Abominations" was hardly an accident. Brown surely hoped that the new higher tariffs would allow him to buy American made goods more cheaply and sell them to American customers who sought to avoid the higher prices of imported cloths and carpets.

Brown quickly settled into his new role as commission merchant and retailer for an American market. He traveled around the country, seeking the best goods to entice the customers of Philadelphia. His most frequent destination was Boston, where he went to cash in on the textile mills that flourished in New England. Valuing both the technical skills of these American businesses and the products they had to offer, Brown became a connoisseur of American flannels, twills, cotton prints and plaid blankets which he continued to send back to Philadelphia. On these trips Brown also scouted for talent that he could employ for his growing business and his enquiries must have been quite

⁶⁶ See David S. Brown to Alord, Jackson and Green, June 27 1832, Box 1, David S. Brown Papers, HSP; David S. Brown to Amos Lawrence, June 27 1832, Box 1, David S. Brown Papers, HSP.

specific. One young man, Edwin H. Hall, remembered Brown when he decided to leave Boston and look for work further south, writing “[y]ou will undoubtedly recollect a conversation held with the writer of this at the Stores of Tilerton and Brown in this City, which was concluded by a request on your part to be informed of any young men (“True Blue Yankee”) who could be recommended as suitable for the Philadelphia market...I think I have found such a one...[i]n short it is I myself.”⁶⁷ Hall’s brazen self-promotion aside, it is notable that Brown was looking for salesmen to complement his American goods. Having committed himself to the domestic market, he had clearly decided to eschew salesmen who gave off a foreign air, a quality that some clerks cultivated because of the associations customers made between luxury and the European continent. Instead Brown sought out men that seemed American through and through.⁶⁸

While it might seem that the Franklin Institute had nothing left to offer Brown, a man who already seemed comfortable with American manufactures, the organization was, in fact, perfectly situated to help Brown to better understand his market. Brown and his colleagues made no secret of the fact that they felt themselves constantly “subject to the whims of those to whom we sell our goods.”⁶⁹ This dependency was highly unsettling for Brown and he grappled with a market that went “dull” all too often.⁷⁰ It was increasingly important for Brown to try and connect with the consumer and ignite their

⁶⁷ Edwin H. Hall to David S. Brown, September 22, 1833, Box 1, David S. Brown Papers, HSP.

⁶⁸ See Brian Luskey, “The Marginal Men: Merchant’s Clerks and Society in Northeastern United States, 1790-1860” (PhD. Diss., Emory University, 2004).

⁶⁹ J.W Paige to David S. Brown. May 27 1834, Box 1, David S. Brown Papers, HSP.

⁷⁰ William R. Hanson to David S. Brown in Rhode Island c/o Lawson and Almy, Aug. 13, 1833, Box 1, David S. Brown Papers, HSP.

desire, or as his partner William Hanson put it “[h]ook men to the art of earning debts – then making new ones.”⁷¹

The Franklin Institute’s annual fairs proved to be the perfect vehicle to explore the market and spark consumer desire. By 1844, Brown was a popular exhibitor at the fair, earning first class premiums for his printed cottons, super fancy cassimeres, and embossed table and piano covers as well as awards for embroidered plaid woolen shawls, furniture prints and striped cassimeres.⁷² The Institute was particularly impressed with the fact that these goods, now made at Brown’s own factory – the Washington Manufacturing Co. of Gloucester, New Jersey - matched the quality of any European cloths and stood as a testament to the technical capabilities of American manufacturers. Although Brown did deposit some of his own productions, he also made sure that his old contacts, such as the manufacturers W & D.D. Farnum benefited from his new association. The “black cloths” and “French style fancy cassimeres” he deposited on their behalf won the Institutes acclaim; the Board of Judges declared them “evidence of great perfection in American manufacture.” Once again Brown’s actions suggest he was interested in promoting the idea of American manufactures for its own sake and not just for his own profit.⁷³

Brown’s involvement changed in 1850, with the opening of the School of Design. Joining the Franklin Institute’s board, he sat on the committee that oversaw the school.

⁷¹ William R. Hanson to David S. Brown in Boston c/o J. W. Paige, Aug. 13, 1833, Box 1, David S. Brown Papers, HSP.

⁷² *Franklin Institute The Fifteenth Exhibition of American Manufactures, Held in the City of Philadelphia from the 21st of October to the 1st of November, inclusive 1845, by the Franklin Institute of the State of Pennsylvania, for the Promotion of the Mechanic Arts* (Philadelphia?, 1845); *Franklin Institute Seventeenth Exhibition of American Manufactures Held in the City of Philadelphia, From the 19th to the 30th of October Inclusive, 1847 by the Franklin Institute of the State of Pennsylvania, for the Promotion of the Mechanic Arts* (Philadelphia?, 1847).

⁷³ *Franklin Institute Seventeenth Exhibition of American Manufactures*, (1847).

After the Franklin Institute ran out of funds and severed all connection, Brown returned in 1861 as a Board Member, becoming President of the School in 1872. Brown's interest in the School once again displayed his economic savvy and his keen interest in promoting all things American. Initially he channeled his support of the school through the Franklin Institute, but in his later years he found that the students could furnish him with designs for his print works, which he had started in 1845 and extended in 1872 into the Ancona Printing Company. But his interest was more than purely commercial. His grandson recalled Brown visiting the school on Filbert Street nearly every day, often to deliver patterns he had received from Europe to aid in the young women's training.⁷⁴ Brown's shifting requirements, from a man who sought to sell consumers on what he had to offer, like hooked fish, to catering more to the shopper's desires and tastes, reflected the broader shift that the Franklin Institute in particular experienced between the 1820s and the 1850s.

The School of Design accomplished many things for the Institutes. First it shifted the women producers, who had long troubled the Institutes' definition of producer, into a different category, that of taste maker. This way, the Institutes continued to incorporate the efforts of women into the broader project of cultivating an American economy, but it removed them from their direct competition with the men, who also produced fancy goods for sale. Second, the School acknowledged the power of consumer taste for luxuries and refinement without giving up on the idea of promoting specifically American manufactures. Thus, while establishing the School of Design effectively acknowledged the place that American consumers had in cultivating the nation's economy, neither Institute gave up on the idea of educating the consumer, instructing

⁷⁴ Knauff, *An Experiment in Training*, 55-57.

individual purchasers to buy the domestically made goods that reflected America's success as a nation.

The promotion of refinement as opposed to industrial strength came though most clearly in 1852, when William Kelley addressed the Franklin Institute at its twenty second annual exhibition. It must have been inspiring sight. In front of him lay nearly 40,000 square feet of exhibition space, that filled the salons and halls of the Institute. The walls were decked with swaths of fabrics, all colors and sizes, hanging in great loops from the ceiling. Beneath these canopies lay an array of goods that ran from stoves and grates to "William Horstmann's Fancy Taffeta Bonnet Ribbons," winner of one of the four gold medals that the Institute awarded that year.⁷⁵ What made the spectacle of manufactured goods even more exciting for Kelley was that all this bounty had come from the labor and ingenuity of Americans: not a single imported item was on display in that hall. To Kelley these American goods reflected the hope of increased wealth, American civilization and prosperity, not only for the nation overall, but for a manufacturing center like Philadelphia in particular. In that cornucopia of consumer goods, Kelley saw America as "millions of luxurious citizens" all waiting to buy the goods that to him expressed the "life of [the] nation."⁷⁶

His speech reflected that dream of refinement for the masses. Replacing the troubling concept of luxury with comfort, Kelley could wholeheartedly endorse the vast array of consumer goods the Institute's exhibition had on offer. Indeed, by promoting the purchase of goods for comfort, the Institutes cleverly bypassed the difficulties of consumption beyond need. Stepping beyond that dilemma, they instead presented a

⁷⁵ *Franklin Institute Report of the Twenty Second Exhibition* (1852), 13.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

democracy of goods, asserting that comfort was something every American might expect, and it was its universal availability that spoke of America's success as a democratic nation. As William Kelley described it:

“The age of mere utility has passed...our age is one of refinement. Three centuries ago the English laborer made his bed of straw upon the bare earth, the floor of his cabin. He knew not the luxury of a chimney...[n]ow the healthy man, whose labor is most poorly requited, gathers his family around him with gratitude to the man who invented chimney corners; and if we peep through his well-glazed window, we may note the *designs* which embellish his carpet, and the stained paper with which the walls of his apartment are covered.”⁷⁷

In this rendition of American society, the success of the democratic experiment was encapsulated in the working man's ability to clothe and house his family in refined comfort and material elegance, matching the standard of America's middle-class families.

Kelley's speech was an illustration of how successful the American model of political economy had become in comparison to the outmoded English one. Any polity that rewarded the working man with these material comforts must by all accounts be a success. But Kelley's speech also indicated that the figure of the purchaser or shopper was starting to take on new shape. No longer simply a “thrifty farmer” as Professor Mason had alleged, the shopper was evolving into a woman. As Kelley himself put it, “No man having built himself a dwelling, would venture without having consulted wife, sister or cousin, to select paper for its walls or carpets for its floor.”⁷⁸ It was women, Kelley argued, who were possessed of natural good taste, and women who had the charge of the domestic sphere. It was thus natural to assume that women should become the chief consumers of comfort: and women, who had the obligation to make the correct choices and choose American. The Institutes of course would be willing to help. They

⁷⁷ *Franklin Institute Report of the Twenty Second Exhibition of American Manufactures* (1852), 15.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 17

would redouble their efforts to train women: not only to consume correctly, but also to produce the designs that American goods would be modeled on.

The decision to cultivate a refined female consumer was very much congruent with the Institutes' broader effort to bring respectability and status to the work and lives of manufacturers/ but in the long term this decision also contributed to an ongoing process of class formation in the 1830s and 40s in urban America. The Institutes had always hoped to cultivate an audience that was well off, well-behaved and refined in their manners and habits. The charging of admission, combined with the encouragement of female visitors, had been an effort to infuse the fairs with the kind of domesticity that was increasingly constitutive of middle-class manners in the 1830s. Similarly, the exclusion of the wage laborer from the ranks of membership, had been another way in which the Institutes had hoped to encourage a more middle-class status for their organization. Their association with educational institutes, like the University of Pennsylvania and New York University, had likewise contributed to the idea that these organizations were not workingmen's associations, but organizations of gentleman manufacturers; efforts that reflected the ongoing separation between the owners of productive means and capital and the laborers in the urban workshops and factories of America in the 1830s and 40s. In the same way, the ability to buy highly finished manufactured goods, wear them or place them in a well-cared for home (where domestic labor was carried out by hired female help) and display these goods through the rituals of urban sociability, such as dinner engagements, afternoon teas and evening dances and parties, had become by the 1830s and 40s, one of the chief markers of a middle-class lifestyle. Indeed, the work of women

as consumers was important in terms of displaying social capital and thus maintaining a highly fluid and uncertain position of social status.⁷⁹

Thus, in their attempts to cultivate a refined female consumer, the Institutes helped to position the consumption of finished manufactured goods as a middle-class preoccupation. At the same time, speakers like Mason and Kelley were, in the 1850s, framing this middle-class consumption as a hallmark of American democracy. The choices that women were making as consumers, reflected in their eyes, the ways in which the American political economy had succeeded where European models had failed. In Kelley's opinion, American women were only behaving in a truly patriotic way when they bought the right goods; that is to say American made, American in design, reflecting the refinement but not the excess of a domestic lifestyle that provided evidence of America's success as a nation. Although far from realized, Kelley's aspirations reflected a new role for women as shoppers. If, as the Institutes had discovered, the female consumer had a more important part to play in defining and sustaining America's political economy than anyone had previously imagined, then women must start to take on their new obligations as consumers. By the 1850s, the Institutes had given up on cultivating producers and pushing for a higher tariff. That era seemed to be over, particularly since 1846 had witnessed the passage of the Walker Tariff, which instituted the lowest duties since 1824. Thus the men of the Institutes' futile hope was that they could continue to instill a republican resistance to foreign goods into consumers and looked especially to women to fulfill that civic obligation to their nation's economy. Yet this must have seemed hopeless, even to the most stalwart members. Although both

⁷⁹ My model for discussing the performance and maintenance of class draws on the work of Sven Beckert, *Monied Metropolis: New York and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001) and Stansell, *City of Women*.

organizations lasted into the twentieth century, they were no longer influential institutions on the urban landscape. Increasingly, both of these former giants were now losing ground to a rising cohort of retailers, advertisers and ultimately free traders who offered a quite different and intoxicating vision of the American consumer to the urban public.

Chapter Five

“They Now Advertise Liberally”: Retail, Advertising and the rise of the American Consumer in the Era of Free Trade, 1840 – 1861.

In the early 1840s, as New York and Philadelphia matured into thriving commercial centers, a new relationship emerged between middle-class shoppers and urban retailers. As these shop-keepers cultivated a new rapport with their customers, paying attention to their wishes and courting their custom, they helped to create a new kind of fashionable consumer, whose desires boosted business and sustained commercial reputations.

Formulated in large part by a cohort of urban retailers and augmented by the efforts of a collection of advertisers, this consumer was an influential, ubiquitous figure whose tastes and desires became a powerful force within the American marketplace. Unlike the ambiguous figure of the consumer in the early republic, the consumer at mid-century was newly visible and important. Rooted in an evolving commercial culture, defined by commercial men and their imperatives, the figure of the refined urban shopper became a cultural and political force in its own right.

Retailers and advertisers magnified consumers' influence by making them the central figures in a newly imagined community. As consumers saw themselves reflected in the commercial ephemera of the day, and shared with one another the reading of advertisements, broadsides and trade cards in the public spaces of cities and towns, they began to see themselves as individuals connected through their consumer practices and desires.¹ Indeed, the proliferation of advertising in urban centers provided citizens with a shared language of consumption, one which gave a widely circulated meaning to the practices of middle-class shopping, even as it suggested that consumption was increasingly an act determined by individual choice and personal taste.² Moreover, as retailers and advertisers fashioned the mid-century shopper into a familiar icon in a shared visual vocabulary, the consumer became a representative figure in a vision of a newly domesticated democratic society.³ This figure helped to perpetuate a comfortable

¹ On how the reading of commercial ephemera can create communities see David M. Henkin, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). Henkin draws on the work of Benedict Anderson, which argues that the practice of reading texts which address readers in a rational and impersonal way, allows individuals to imagine a universe of other readers beyond themselves, that they do not know, but are nonetheless connected to through the print culture they share. However, Henkin also emphasizes the physical nature of this shared experience which reinforces the sense of community. I would argue that the shared commercial spaces of the city, in particular the retail store, also worked to reinforce the belief among individual shoppers that they belonged to a shared culture of consumption. On the concept of imagined communities see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; reprint: London: Verso, 1991). However, both authors overlook the role of the image in this process, which is something I pay particular attention to below.

² On consumption as a cultural system in which meaning (including social values, need and desire) is produced and assigned to objects see Jean Baudrillard, "Consumer Society" in *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader* ed. Lawrence B. Glickman (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 48-49.

³ There has been a great deal of scholarship that has looked at the connections between consumption and democracy. Daniel Boorstin's vision of a "consumption community" argued that the use of similar branded goods bound individuals together into malleable and open ended communities that replaced political communities. But Boorstin's vision overemphasized the homogenizing force of consumption as a practice and failed to take into account the different ways in which individuals entered into consumer culture and appropriated the meaning of goods. Boorstin also failed to acknowledge the unequal access different groups had to consumer goods and material resources, thereby undermining the element of democracy he sought to locate in these practices. A more nuanced evaluation of the connection between democracy and consumption comes from Roland Marchand's discussion of the parable of democracy that pervaded 1920s advertising which offered a vision of democratic fellowship through similarities of consumption styles and

fiction about the material benefits of American liberty and equality while keeping the more frightening and chaotic elements of democracy at bay. Finally, the introduction of this new consumer had an unexpected effect on the ongoing political discussions about the initiation of more aggressive free trade policy in the United States. Alert to the ways in which Americans were beginning to imagine themselves as consumers within the marketplace, free trade proponents began to use the figure of the consumer as a persuasive tool, marrying certain types of consumption to civic entitlements, to encourage politicians to champion free trade on behalf of the American people. Of course, retailers and advertisers had not imagined that their self-interested efforts might resonate in this way. Yet by 1846, as the passage of the Walker Tariff initiated a brief era of free trade in the United States, it was clear that white middle-class consumers had gained a new ascendancy in America.

While many historians, most notably William Leach, have usually dated the emergence of a powerful, visible consumer in American culture to the late 1880s, the developments of the 1840s and 50s suggest that the modern retail culture Leach described had earlier beginnings.⁴ By mid-century retailers in large urban centers believed that they had to

that glossed over inequities of political power or the control of wealth. But by focusing on advertising only, Marchand did not extend that analysis in to the lived experience of shopping and the meaning of the goods themselves. Moreover, both of these arguments center on consumption in the late 19th and early 20th century, and as such both miss the ways in which consumption in the mid nineteenth century was shaping the meaning of belonging in a democratic polity. For a particularly good account of how the production and consumption of one item, ready made clothing, shaped both the practices of capitalism and democracy at this time, see Michael Zakim *Ready-Made Democracy: A History of Men's Dress in the American Republic, 1760-1860* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003). For Boorstin's description of "consumption communities" see Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Random House, 1973), 89-148. For Marchand and the "parable of the democracy of goods" see Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 217-222, and on consumer democracies see 63-65.

⁴ William Leach's path breaking book was in many ways a model for this chapter, but as my research suggests, by starting in the 1880s he overlooks the rich and sophisticated culture of retail and advertising

attract a more sophisticated and discerning consumer than ever before. Shop-keepers deliberated over how to catch this consumer's attention and as a result developed new strategies to court the consumer, including innovative techniques of display, fresh methods of providing shoppers with information about their stores and products and improved service. But for all this innovation it is important to note that the mid-century retail culture remained centered around the goods themselves. Unlike the consumer culture of the 1890s which revolved around building a fanciful world for consumers that offered up goods as a path to fulfilling personal desires, retailers and advertisers at mid-century worked to elevate the merchandise as aesthetic object, not physical manifestations of fantasy. Their efforts to capture consumer attention through new techniques of display and service did change commercial and political understandings of the consumer, as well as position consumption as a means through which Americans could pursue social status. But the act of shopping was not yet the transformative act of self it would become in the twentieth century. Instead, nineteenth century retail culture provided the crucial step between the late eighteenth century mistrust of consumption and the twentieth century's embrace of consumption as a defining act of individual expression and personal fulfillment.⁵

that dates back to the 1840s. See William Leach *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993). Leach's periodization has been reinforced by a number of other excellent works. It starts with Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions* (New York: MacMillan, 1899); on advertising see also Jackson T. Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, and Charles F. McGovern, *Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006). Even comprehensive surveys of consumption tend to gloss over the early and mid-nineteenth century, see for example, *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History 1880-1980* ed., Richard Wightman Fox and T.J Jackson Lears, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983); *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods, 1880-1920* ed., Simon J. Bronner, (New York: Norton, 1989) and *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader* ed., Glickman.

⁵ This shift in retail culture was part of a broader economic shift in the 1840s which was characterized by new technologies of production and distribution and hence an expanding market in the United States. See

These new mid-century visions of the consumer were in themselves an effort to replace older conceptions of the consumer, conceptions dating from the 1810s and 1820s that did not suit the aspirations of ambitious retailers and advertisers in the 1840s and 1850s. The early republican understanding of consumption had for the most part deployed the figure of the consumer to serve political agendas, a use which gave rise to interpretations which ranged from the highly virtuous to the most frivolous shopper. Perhaps the most contentious representation was the consumer as farmer. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, politicians in favor of protection had used the farmer to identify the most virtuous form of American consumption. At a moment when Jefferson and his supporters were anxiously attempting to convince Americans that they could live without luxury imported goods as well as undermine the elite refinement of the Federalists, it is hardly surprising that they identified the farmer as the ultimate American consumer, whose inclination toward simplicity and taste for homespun represented the shopping habits of the nation. Of course, the idea that the farmer lived entirely without imported goods was a fiction. Even politicians who championed the vision of American self-sufficiency were forced at various points in the 1810s to acknowledge that farmers had to buy imported goods.⁶ But the idea that the farmer was the ideal American consumer continued to resonate through the 1820s.

This vision of the consumer, who was first and foremost a producer, is evidence that Americans did not recognize a distinctive and independent consumer identity in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Instead, the moral attributes of the early

Alfred D. Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), 7-8, 13-122.

⁶ For example Tench Coxe, the proponent of American manufacturing, was forced to concede that Americans could not survive without importations. See Chapter Two.

republican consumer remained tied to his or her ability to produce, a belief that left women in particular open to criticism when it came to assessing an individual's consumption. In part because of this producerist lens, the idea that the consumer was a farmer remained potent through the 1820s. In addition, the persistence of this idea can be attributed to the framework that Americans used to conceive of their nation's political economy in 1810s and 1820s, one that described the American economy as made up of the great triumvirate of producing interests: merchants, manufacturing and agriculture. In this model, balance was key. If governmental legislation favored one interest over the other, the delicate equilibrium would be disrupted and the nation's economy would start to crumble.⁷

As sectional power became a defining force in American political life, this model gained a new lease on life. Political discourse increasingly identified the cotton producing south and grain rich mid-west with the agrarian interest and acknowledged the north east as the geographical base for the manufacturing and mercantile strongholds. The diverging nature of these two regional economies, still bound together by a larger capitalist marketplace, prompted Americans to continue to consider themselves within the framework of the trinity of interests. Since merchants imported goods, and manufacturers made them, political economists found it easy to imagine that the consumers must be the farmers. This belief was reinforced by the fact that the South and West had very little in the way of factories and that they did purchase the majority of their textiles and other

⁷ This division of the economy into three major sectors is discussed in Lawrence A. Peskin, *Manufacturing Revolution. The Intellectual Origins of Early American Industry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Cathy Matson and Peter Onuf, "Toward a Republican Empire: Interest and Ideology in Revolutionary America" *American Quarterly*, 37 (Autumn, 1985): 496-531; and Daniel S. Dupre, "The Panic of 1819 and the Political Economy of Sectionalism" *The Economy of Early America* ed., Cathy Matson, (Philadelphia: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 263-292. See also see Chapter Two.

manufactured items from the north.⁸ Perhaps the item that symbolized this relationship most clearly was the ready-made suit. The pre-cut and tailored garments flew from workshops and sweatshops in New York to retailers' shelves in Augusta, Milledgeville, Tuscaloosa, Vicksburg and St. Louis. Indeed, the white southern and western consumers of ready-made clothing helped to reinforce preconceived notions that the farmer was *the* American consumer, throughout the antebellum period.⁹

While some political authors made much of the virtuous consumer, other writers spent their time chastising a very different kind of spender. These critiques, which appeared mostly in newspapers as moralizing tales, posited a far different picture of the consumer: one where the belle and the dandy reigned supreme. Through anecdote and advice, these writings constructed a picture of a frivolous, idle consumer. "When I see a young girl – finely dressed but very indolent," wrote "Poor Robert the Scribe" "who curls her hair and cuts a pigeon-wing in the newest style – yet who could not dress a fowl, nor mend her husbands stockings – I can't help thinking with my Grandmother – *She has a*

⁸ For a useful summary of the ways in which America's economy diverged along regional lines see Walter Licht, *Industrializing America: The Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 21-45. The subject of inter-regional trade has produced a large body of scholarship, beginning with Douglass North's hypothesis that the growth of southern export staples stimulated the economic growth of the entire nation through inter-regional trade. See Douglass C. North, *The Economic Growth of the United States, 1790-1860* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, 1961). For the purposes of this discussion one of the most useful articles is Thomas F. Huertas, "Damnifying Growth in the Antebellum South," *The Journal of Economic History* 39 (Mar. 1979): 91. Huertas specifies exactly what the South imported (both from domestic and foreign merchants) in 1860. Note that the top four imports are 1. Cotton woven goods, 2. Woolen goods, 3. Shoes, 4. Men's ready-made clothing.

⁹ On the production, distribution and consumption of ready-made clothing, an item which exemplifies the flow of goods from North to South, see Zakim, *Ready-Made Democracy*, 48-54. It is important to note that this discussion of ready-made clothing does not include African-American slaves as consumers. Zakim points out that ready-made clothing was not intended for slaves, whose masters usually bought cheap cloth in the north and then had these textiles made into cheap clothing by a local tailor or seamstress. Thus, Northerners were not imagining slaves as consumers, although plantation owners were buying large quantities of textiles and shoes to clothe their slaves. On the South and West as consumers of Northern manufactured farming tools see Seth Rockman, "Northern Manufacturing, Southern Slavery and the Business Ethics of Plantation Provisioning in Antebellum America" unpublished manuscript cited with permission from the author. For an article that looks at the consumption of shoes in the postbellum period see Henry L. Swint, "Northern Interest in the Shoeless Southerner," *The Journal of Southern History*, 16 (Nov. 1950): 457-471.

fine gloss but she won't wear well."¹⁰ Writing as "Poor Robert the Scribe," Charles Miner, presented an unabashed portrait of the frivolous female consumer, one which drew on older traditions of associating female luxury consumption with a lack of substance, a drain on resources and a failure to produce.¹¹ But his critiques of consumption were not limited to women. He was equally suspicious of the "young man, dressing in the very pink of the mode." For these young dandies, he foresaw the "talons of poverty and contempt," in their future, thus condemning all frivolous unproductive consumers to a bleak fate.¹²

These kinds of moralizing tales enjoyed a wide circulation in the 1810s. Charles Miner, a Federalist politician who lived for most of his adult life in western Pennsylvania, originally published his stories in the local newspaper, *The Gleaner and Luzerne Advertiser* based in Wilkes-Barre.¹³ But his story on the dangers of "fine gloss" was also published in four other newspapers around New England.¹⁴ Other stories of his that called young women who dressed in lace and wore combs in their hair, nothing "but a squash"

¹⁰ Charles Miner, *Essays From the Desk of Poor Robert the Scribe, Containing Lessons in Manners, Morals and Domestic Economy, Originally Published in the Gleaner* (Doylestown, PA: Asher Miner, 1815), 11-13.

¹¹ The long standing connections between female consumers, luxury, corrupting frivolity and political corruption are well known. One of the best discussions of the phenomenon in historical perspective is Victoria de Grazia, "Changing Consumption Regimes," in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, ed., Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 11-25. See also Jennifer Jones, "Coquettes and Grisettes: Women Buying and Selling in Ancien Regime Paris," in *The Sex of Things*, 25-54; Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Lori Merish, *Sentimental Materialism. Gender, Commodity Culture and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000).

¹² Miner, *Essays*, 5-6. Anxieties about male dandies stretched back to the 1760s and continued on into the 1840s. On revolutionary fears about fops see Kate Haulman, "Fashion and the Culture Wars of Philadelphia," *William and Mary Quarterly* 62 (Oct. 2005), <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/wm/62.4/haulman.html> [accessed Jan. 27, 2009], pars 2-3, 9-14. On concerns over dandies in the 1840s see Zakim, *Ready-Made Democracy*, 193-195.

¹³ "Charles Miner," *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress* www.bioguide.congress.gov [accessed Jan. 27, 2009].

¹⁴ "It has a fine gloss" was published in *American Advocate* (Hallowell, Maine) Apr. 24, 1811; *Merrimack Intelligencer* (Haverhill, Mass.) Apr. 27, 1811; *Boston Satirist or Weekly Museum*, May 9, 1812; *Connecticut Gazette* (New London, CT.) May 11, 1814.

found even greater circulation, published in newspapers from Philadelphia to Alexandria, Virginia.¹⁵ Similarly, Ezra Sampson, an author and clergyman, who published what he called “coarse homely household truths” in the *Connecticut Courant*, was particularly appalled by the American tendency towards fashionable emulation, particularly when families could not afford it.¹⁶ “The rich,” he wrote “have...one exclusive privilege: they have a right to make a splendid appearance in the world, because their circumstance can well afford it...persons who are but small in circumstances, must prudently husband what they have, or it will quickly slip out of their hands. How unwise is it for *them* to make an ostentation of wealth which they do not possess.”¹⁷ Sampson was especially afraid that this kind of consumption would ruin the republic, as he said “a free people, whose passions are set altogether on the pursuit of gain, can hardly remain free very long.”¹⁸ “Poor Robert” and Sampson both alluded to consumers whose blinkered efforts to secure personal wealth and their consequent spending endangered personal independence, communal morality and national interest. While their diatribes were diametrically opposed to the descriptions of the “virtuous farmer” in tone and content, the two discourses did have two things in common; both staked the consumer’s morality on the individual shopper’s productive abilities and both visions connected to wider political

¹⁵ This story was also published in some New England newspapers but for the Philadelphia cite see *Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser*, Oct. 16, 1811 and for Alexandria see (Alexandria) *Daily Gazette*, Oct. 21, 1811.

¹⁶ Ezra Sampson, *The Brief Remarker on the Ways of Man: or Compendious Dissertations; Respecting Social and Domestic Relations and Concerns, and the Various Economy of Life; Intended and Calculated, more especially for the use of those in the common ranks of American Society* (Hudson, N.Y.: published for the author by Stone and Cross, 1818), iii. For Ezra Sampson’s obituary see Patricia P. Clark, “Obituaries from the Family Visitor April 6, 1822-April 3, 1824,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 68 (Jan. 1960): 83.

¹⁷ Sampson, *Brief Remarker on the Ways of Man*, 34-35.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

(although not necessarily partisan) agendas. As such, neither description came close to matching the realities of shopping and spending for many Americans.

A far more relevant discussion of consumption and thus a more realistic vision of the consumer, came from the guidance of women like Lydia Maria Child and Catherine Beecher. These women – two of the best-selling authors in America in the 1830s and 40s – also drew on the idea that there were too many frivolous consumers in the United States. Nonetheless, instead of simply criticizing, they had an abundance of practical suggestions to make middle-class Americans more efficient in their use of the household budget. This included advice on how to refurbish items that might otherwise have to be replaced, practical hints on how to keep household furniture and family clothing clean, neat and well-tended and finally some general tips on finding ways to save money in the family budget. For example, in her 1828 treatise on household economy, Child informed readers that “skim-milk and water, with a bit of glue in it, heated scalding hot, is excellent to restore old, rusty black Italian crape” and that housekeepers should “save vials and bottles. Apothecaries and grocers will give something for them.”¹⁹ Child’s advice was directed to those who aspired to middle-class status but who were vulnerable in economic downturns and would struggle to sustain their lifestyle. These were families, and women, who had to work to maintain their gentility. The homes she made reference to had all manner of furnishings from carpets to upholstered furniture as well as silverware and silks, whose purchase and care were, according to the advice, in the care

¹⁹ Lydia Maria Child, *The American Frugal Housewife, Dedicated to those who are not ashamed of economy*, (1828, reprint., Boston: Carter, Hendee and Co., 1833), 11, 14. See also Catherine Beecher, *Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School* (Boston: T.H. Webb, 1842). On the success of *The American Frugal Housewife* see Herbert Edwards, “Lydia M. Child’s *The Frugal Housewife*,” *The New England Quarterly*, 26 (Jun. 1953): 243.

of the housewife. Thus, Child's vision of the consumer was the middle-class woman whose efficient habits shaped the successful practice of domestic economy.

Child and Beecher's treatises both spoke to the unpredictability of the nineteenth century marketplace, the swift rise and fall of family fortunes and the concomitant fragility of status in the antebellum period. But even as they addressed these new realities, the consumer was instructed, like their eighteenth century predecessors to be restrained as part of an established morality that accompanied good spending habits. In fact, Lydia Maria Child's publishers even printed a Franklin maxim on the front cover of the twelfth edition of the book, linking consumers back to words of wisdom that had counseled shoppers nearly a century earlier. Like those earlier works, Child warned that spending beyond one's income was not only "morally wrong...[but] injurious beyond calculation to the interests of [the] country."²⁰ This was an argument that had long connected personal independence with national prosperity. Thus, the consumer that Child, Beecher and others like them imagined was one that successfully husbanded the family's resources, making their middle-class income provide all the comforts of home. These writers saw a consumer whose efforts were a carefully orchestrated effort of balancing budgets and working hard to buy and preserve the family's goods which constituted the hard-won social status of middle-class life. While the advice was evolving to fit the new range of consumer goods that existed in American women's lives, the message remained very similar to its earlier iterations. The virtuous alternative to the belle was the restrained and frugal female shopper whose productivity was located in her

²⁰ *Ibid.* 5. On Franklin, as well as other counselors on the art of wise consumption in the 1810s see Chapter One.

effort to buy for her family and conserve her husband's wealth by careful household management.

By the 1840s, these visions of the consumer found themselves competing against a very different figure. Unlike the extremes of the self-sufficient farmer or the dandy and the belle, both of which had served as polemical tools, this new ideal grew out of multiple, unconnected efforts on the part of retailers, merchants and advertisers to expand their own businesses and put more money into their pockets. Yet, such efforts coalesced into something more than the sum of their parts. By re-organizing shopping areas and re-modeling their stores to appeal to the middle-class shopper, in their efforts to cater directly to their customers' needs by offering the services of attentive clerks, and above all in their appeals to a consuming public to buy at their establishments, retailers and advertisers re-conceptualized the consumer in American life. They breathed new life into the figure of the consumer, giving Americans a new way to perform and embody this identity.²¹ In the process, Americans who observed and absorbed these changes,

²¹ The idea that shopkeepers and advertisers could play a part in creating a broadly constructed understanding of what it meant to be a consumer is one that is theoretically based on the concept that categories of identity such as gender, race and class, are to some degree socially constructed while still being rooted in social and in the case of the first two categories, biological experience. However, these constructions are not hegemonic and can be inhabited, performed and manipulated to a certain degree, depending on historical circumstance. The most useful examples of this literature for me have been Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History, Gender and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Judith P. Butler, *Gender Trouble and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Barbara Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History," in *Region, Race and Reconstructions: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, ed., J. Morgan Kousser and James McPherson, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982). For class the classic text is E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* 1963; (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964) but for a more updated and nuanced rendering of how class identity can be constructed through cultural practice see Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

who embraced them as part of their efforts to create a middle-class identity, came to re-imagine the part that consumers might play in shaping their nation.

The consumers of the 1840s and 50s encountered a quite different commercial landscape to the one that their grandparents might have known at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the intervening decades, a slow but significant change had worked its way through the cities, towns and villages of the mid-Atlantic. Unsurprisingly, the extremes of the virtuous farmer and the corrupted belle and dandy, had rarely matched the experience that individual consumers had in the marketplace. Over the course of the nineteenth century, middle-class consumers' habits suggested that Americans were neither wholly self-sufficient nor the slaves of fashion. Instead their consumption suggested a steady but growing engagement with the marketplace, both on a local and trans-Atlantic scale. A steady decline in household manufacturing meant that between 1840 and 1860 most residents of New England, the mid-Atlantic and the Northwest Territories had stopped producing their own textiles and household furnishings. Instead they chose to buy factory and mill-made goods of all kinds.²² Similarly, technological innovations in other lines of production meant that traditionally expensive items became more widely available. Carpets, stoves, pianos, household textiles, cutlery, mantel clocks and crockery were all examples of goods that became easier to reproduce in large quantities in the 1840s and 50s, and accordingly became more obtainable by mid-century.²³ Yet these items simply

²² On household manufacturing see Rolla Tryon, *Household Manufacturing in the United States, 1640-1860* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1917), 372-3.

²³ Stuart Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class* (1998, reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 140; F.W. Taussig, *The Tariff History of the United States 1892* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1923), 147; David A. Hounshell, *From the American System to Mass Production 1800-1932: The Development of Manufacturing Technology in the United States* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 51-65. As Hounshell makes clear these developments were not yet "mass production" as they

provided more variety in homes that were already furnished with looking glasses, grandfather clocks earthen ware ceramics, books and candlesticks.²⁴ What white middle-class American consumers were experiencing for the most part at mid-century was a wider variety of items on sale and a higher likelihood that they would be able to afford them.

These purchases could be made from a range of places. Most Americans in the 1840s still lived outside large cities such as New York and Philadelphia and for them the main source of consumer goods were the dry goods stores in their local town.²⁵ These ubiquitous establishments were supposed to sell everything a consumer could need or want. By 1840, just over 8,500 retail stores existed in the state of New York, excluding those stores in New York County, and in Pennsylvania there were 4,400 beyond Philadelphia County. For the most part, these stores were likely non-specialized and sold something for everyone.²⁶ Indeed, Susan Fenimore Cooper describing the local stores in Cooperstown in 1850 noted that “at the same counter you may buy kid gloves and a spade; a lace veil and a jug of molasses; a satin dress and a broom.”²⁷ Cooper’s description evoked a store where the jumble of goods was part of its charm. But the

were not goods assembled out of identically made interchangeable parts. However, the industrialization of many manufacturing techniques in textile, metalwork and woodwork contributed to goods being made in factories and workshops in larger batches by the 1840s. The exception was perhaps the clock, see Hounshell, *From the American System to Mass Production*, 51-60.

²⁴ Paul G. E. Clemens, “The Consumer Culture of the Middle Atlantic, 1760-1820” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 62 (Oct. 2005) <http://www.historycooperative.org/journal/wmq/62.4/clemens.html> [accessed Jan. 27 2009]. For an overview of this process see Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Knopf, 1992).

²⁵ Fred Mitchell Jones, “Retail Stores in the United States, 1800-1860,” *The Journal of Marketing* 1 (Oct. 1936): 134. For the south in particular see Lewis E. Atherton, *The Southern Country Store 1800-1860* (1949, reprint, New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 63-86.

²⁶ These figures come from the 1840 decennial census. See *Compendium of the Enumeration of the Inhabitants and Statistics of the United States* (Washington: Thomas Allen, 1841) 121, 133. The precise number for New York is 8,587 and for Pennsylvania 4,456.

²⁷ Susan Augusta Fenimore Cooper, [January 1850?] *Journal of a Naturalist in the United States* (London, England: Richard Bentley & Son, 1855), 2:219-246.

anecdote also highlights that by mid-century, rural Americans were familiar with the idea of the specialty store, so much so that establishments which sold dresses and brooms at the same counter could be described by Fenimore-Cooper as quaint, compared to more recently established milliners or grocery store in Cooperstown. Nonetheless, Fenimore-Cooper's affection was clearly reserved for the "country store" where farmers could mull over a piece of cotton print while his wife picked out "the teacups or brooms."²⁸ Through Cooper's literary eye, the market day trade at the local country store had an air of carnival about it. Similarly, other literary accounts also suggested that rural residents looked forward with great anticipation to the opening of a new store or the arrival of new stock.²⁹

But while these stores were reasonably well stocked and store owners made a point of purchasing new goods perhaps twice a year to keep up with new fashions, some consumers clearly saw the local store as simply a place to purchase only their everyday necessities.³⁰ Eleanor Huse Ames, the wife of a prosperous mechanic who later in life became a successful manufacturer, provides a good example. Ames moved as a young wife to her home in Chicopee, on the Connecticut River in Western Massachusetts in October 1846.³¹ She had soon settled into a routine. Her diary for 1849 suggests that she kept a careful eye on the household expenditures. Besides groceries she purchased cotton and gingham lengths to clothe her and her children, as well as various small sundries such

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ See John Beauchamp Jones, *Life and Adventures of a Country Merchant: A Narrative of his Exploits at Home, During his Travels and in the Cities* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1854), 14-17. I thank Paul Erickson of the American Antiquarian Society for directing me to this reference.

³⁰ Diane Lindstrom, *Economic Development in the Philadelphia Region, 1810-1850* (New York; Columbia University Press, 1978); *American Economic Growth: An Economist's History of the United States*, ed. Lance Davis et al., (New York; Harper & Row, 1972).

³¹ Eleanor Huse Ames, *Diary*, vol. 2 (Oct. 8, 1846), American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass., (hereafter AAS).

as a hood for her daughter Sarah, a cravat, a lace collar and once, a sunshade.³² Yet what is really striking is that Ames made none of her major purchases at the local store in Chicopee. Instead she travelled over 130 miles, spending \$4.00 on a trip back to her old home in Newburyport, to buy on one occasion a carpet and a piano cloth and on another visit, nine yards of expensive pink delaine for her daughters Ellen and Sarah.³³ The reasons for this decision are unclear. Perhaps Ames placed more trust in the storekeepers in her girlhood home, believing they would deliver a better product or perhaps these retailers were prepared to give this long time customer better credit. It is even possible that as a woman who had experienced what the larger towns and cities of the eastern seaboard had to offer, she was prepared to wait when purchasing more expensive items for her home and her family. Whatever the case, for Ames, the items on sale at the dry goods store in Chicopee was simply not enough.

When small items were needed but not available at the local country store, rural consumers were well used to relying on peddlers to fill the gaps. While some peddlers were hired by a peddling company, who provided businesses with a network to carry their goods from town to town and others worked for artisans or manufacturers, the more familiar figure was the independent pack man, who bought a bundle of goods and slowly hawked them around the highways and byways of the American countryside. Daniel Helms, a 35 year old man from Wurtsboro, New York did exactly that in 1851. Having tried his hand as both a book agent and a farm laborer and liking neither, he bought \$45.00 worth of peddling goods in Meadsville, Pennsylvania and set off to try his hand as

³² *Ibid.* For the purchase of cotton lengths see (Jan. 5, 1849), (Jan. 12, 1849), (Jan. 16, 1849), (March 2, 1849), on the hood and cravat see (Jan. 12, 1849), on the lace collar see (Nov. 24, 1849) and the sunshade see (Jun 19, 1849).

³³ *Ibid.* On the carpet see (Apr. 19, 1849) and for the purchase of the delaine see (Jul. 5, 1849).

an itinerant salesman. Helms bought what might be considered the standard pack. He sold pins, caps, lace, trimmings, needles, combs, buttons, thread and socks, a collection of items most often described by contemporary salesmen as “Yankee Notions.” Sometimes he invested in more specific items such as German silver tea sets or jewelry but for the most part he wended his way through Pennsylvania, Ohio and New York with a wide assortment of small goods.³⁴

Helms’ account suggests that consumers in these areas were well used to buying from peddlers, and far from being able to extract good profits from gullible consumers, Helms complained frequently about the ways in which knowledgeable shoppers got the best price out of him. Selling goods along the Allegheny River in 1852, Helms noted sourly that “the people have so much of the swine incorporated into their nature that they expect Goods at less than New York City retail prices and are outrageous, saucy...whining New York Yankees.” Helms assessed, probably correctly, that consumers even as far west as to be almost by the shores of Lake Erie, knew the difference between a bargain and a scam. By the time he reached Cattaraugus County, Helms was thoroughly dejected. “These old Yankee women are hard caces [sic]” he noted, “they will hang on to a ten cent piece and pinch it so hard as to almost make the poor Eagle squeal.”³⁵ Helm’s business was in all likelihood hurt by competition. By 1850, 10,669 peddlers were criss-crossing rural America and most came from New York, Ohio, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania.³⁶ Indeed, not long after his complaints in western

³⁴ Daniel G. Helms Papers, vol. 2, Octavo, 2-3, 19, 36-39, 41-44, AAS.

³⁵ Ibid., 50-52, 62.

³⁶ Walter A Friedman, *Birth of a Salesman: The Transformation of Selling in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 16.

New York, Helms commented “I met the Silk Thread Man. I do hope he will cross my track no more as he hurts my custom.”³⁷ He was probably right.

However, if the peddler hadn’t been by in a while, there was always the possibility of making a trip into the city to shop. The expansion of transportation networks across the United States made shopping excursions more likely by mid century.³⁸ Whereas wealthy shoppers in the early 1800s had expected to spend a whole season in New York, Eleanor Ames’s trips to Newburyport lasted only a few weeks. Depending on a shopper’s distance from large cities like New York or Philadelphia, individuals might even plan excursions designed to last no more than one or two days. Indeed, retailers by the late 1820s were hoping to entice these rural shoppers to the city in order to expand their customer base. Josiah Bonfanti, owner of a fancy goods store in New York, attempted to encourage out-of-town shoppers to make the trip, with an elaborate broadside that featured the verses of a song. Meant to be sung to the tune of Yankee Doodle Dandy, this catchy ditty might have spread well beyond the corner or city wall it was posted on, urging young shoppers to make the trip to New York. Thus the song began,

Sal and I came down to York,
The curious things to see, sir
For darn it, who the deuce would work
ON FREEDOM’S JUBILEE sir?
I sold our peas and everything
To market women aunties,
Then went with Sal to buy a ring,
At Mister JO BONFANTI’S
There’s his number on the sign
In Broadway, very handy
It is two hundred seventy nine,

³⁷ Helms Papers, vol. 2, Octavo, 69.

³⁸ George Rogers Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution, 1815-1860* (New York: Rinehart, 1951).

Sing Yankee-doodle dandy.³⁹

While Bonfanti's lyrics might suggest that these kinds of excursions were only for small scale purchases of trinkets, it seems clear that shopping excursions, whether for a few days or weeks, were also used to order and buy larger and more expensive items. Ames, for example, mentioned a trip to Boston in 1846 to buy the furniture for her new home, a trip that she noted took only the day.⁴⁰ Caroline Barrett-White, a wealthy married woman from Brookline, Massachusetts also made a specific trip into Boston to go with her husband on a "carpet hunting expedition." On another occasion, Barrett-White made the journey down to New York to see friends and engage in a little shopping. As part of her stay, she and her friend Hattie visited the famous department store A.T. Stewart's. A few weeks later when she went into Boston to pick up a silver tea set she and her husband had long since ordered, she discovered to her delight that her husband had also ordered the "heavy curtains" she had seen and admired at Stewart's.⁴¹ It is worth noting that Barrett-White's experience was quite different in nature from the putative Sal. The length of the trip, the shops visited, the items bought all depended on the shopper's wealth and status. But even within these broad parameters, travel to urban retail areas was becoming more common by the 1840s, allowing urban and rural Americans to recognize and covet more new things by mid-century.

Just as the local store and the peddler were established features of rural consumers' landscapes by the 1840s, so too was the specialized retail store and the urban

³⁹ *Brother Jonathan's Second Visit to Jos. Bonfanti's Fancy Store No. 279 Broadway* (New York, N.Y: s.n., between 1824-1839) New-York Historical Society, New York, NY (hereafter N-YHS).

⁴⁰ Ames, *Diary*, (Oct. 8, 1846), AAS.

⁴¹ For her description of the carpet expedition see Caroline Barrett-White Papers, *Diary*, vol. 6 (Dec. 10, 1855), AAS. For the trip to Stewarts see Caroline Barrett-White Papers, *Diary*, vol. 12, (Feb. 25, 1869) and (March 8, 1869), AAS.

shopping district a recognizable entity for urban shoppers by the same decade. But if the concept of an urban retail district was familiar to urban consumers, the stores and retail districts were themselves changing by the mid decades of the century. Perhaps one of the most obvious changes that had coalesced by the 1850s was the emergence of urban spaces entirely dedicated to fashionable shopping. From early on in the nineteenth century, American towns and cities developed retail districts, each with a distinctive reputation for elegance, affordability or cheap bargains.⁴² But these distinctions intensified by the mid-nineteenth century. Broadway, perhaps the country's most famous shopping street, was itself divided into a "dollar" side and a "shilling" side; giving customers the chance to choose their price bracket before even stepping into a store. Customers would want to make that decision carefully. George G. Foster, author and New York observer extraordinaire commented in 1849 that "none but a well practiced citizen can...regain the fashionable side of Broadway – for you must remember that nothing could more effectually stamp you as vulgar than to be seen stumbling over the crockery-crates and second furniture of the shilling pavement."⁴³ Foster's observation, originally published in the New York *Tribune*, would have made middle-class readers aware that as customers, they were now participating in a closely observed and keenly analyzed retail oriented market place. Shopping and shopping districts had become a subject of new interest, which commentators discussed extensively in contemporary guidebooks, satires and travelogues. For consumers in New York in particular, it must

⁴² Thomas David Beal, "Selling Gotham: The Retail Trade in New York City From the Public Market to Alexander T. Stewart's Marble Palace, 1625-1860," (Ph.D Diss., State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1998), 273-288.

⁴³ George G. Foster, *New York in Slices: by an Experienced Carver*, (New York: William H. Graham, 1849), 4. The shilling side was the east side of the street and considered less desirable because of its exposure to the afternoon heat and light. See Jay E. Cantor, "A Monument of Trade: A.T. Stewart and the Rise of the Millionaire's Mansion in New York," *Winterthur Portfolio* 10 (1975): 66. According to native New Yorkers in 2008, the distinction still exists.

have been strange to find that their daily promenade down Broadway had been reified by social commentators and was now held up as the very epitome of American shopping culture.⁴⁴

New attention to shopping districts was supplemented by the changing material experience of “going shopping.” To begin with, some retailers tried to make the streets themselves more amenable to consumers. In the early 1800s, shoppers had already witnessed the widening of sidewalks, enabling them to stroll with ease past shop windows.⁴⁵ By mid-century this impulse had blossomed into something more elaborate. In the early 1850s for example, the notable New York hatter, J. N. Genin, put a bridge across Broadway to save pedestrians from the torrent of carriages and other vehicles that thundered constantly up and down the street. Genin’s bridge carefully ushered customers right to his front door.⁴⁶ As a contemporary engraving suggests, the bridge was designed to cater directly to consumers and provide some distance from the working hullabaloo of the street below. [Fig. 5.1] It is notable that the engraver, J.W. Orr, chose to place a cart man, struggling with his load on the edge of the street underneath the bridge, implying perhaps that the bridge and Genin himself provided only for a genteel class of customer and not the population of New York more generally.

Window displays, particularly in urban stores, also became more elaborate and enticing, as shopkeepers began to compete in earnest for the throngs of customers who flocked past their stores. “Broadway should be visited by the stranger,” wrote Joel Ross

⁴⁴ For just a few examples see Samuel Irenaeus Prime, *Life in New York* (New York: Robert Carter, 56 Canal Street, 1847); E. Porter Beldon, *New York. Past, Present and Future* (New York: George P. Putnam, 1849); William M. Bobo, *Glimpses of New-York City By a South Carolinian Who Had Nothing Else To Do* (Charleston: J.J McCarter, 1852).

⁴⁵ Beal, “Selling Gotham,” 243-253; Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham. A History of New York City to 1898* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 340.

⁴⁶ Ellen W. Kramer, “Contemporary Descriptions of New York City and its Public Architecture ca. 1850,” *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 2 (Dec. 1968): 269.

in 1851. “The splendid display in the windows of goods, ware and merchandize almost dazzle the eyes of the owners, and if I mistake not, sometimes quite bewilders the brains of others.”⁴⁷ The stores’ interiors offered further opportunity for the comfortable perusal of goods in a lavish environment. Glass cases to display items, gas lighting and large showrooms made shopping a quite different experience from purchasing items fifty years earlier, when shopkeepers had kept goods on shelves behind a counter and brought out only what the customer asked for or what the shopkeeper thought the customer could afford.⁴⁸ [Fig.5.2] Indeed, Freeman Hunt, the editor of *Hunt’s Merchants’ Magazine*, advised store owners who wanted to be successful to refrain from displaying goods in a “[h]eap” or in a “heterogeneous mass.”⁴⁹ Some stores went far beyond this simple advice. Glenn & Co, a fancy goods store on Chesnut Street in Philadelphia, had “Italian Tesselated Marble Floors...a Ceiling superbly Frescoed...Magnificent Mirrors...surrounded by a border of richly cut Bohemian Glass [and] ...Chandeliers...of the far-famed *Cornelius*.”⁵⁰ As a result the store’s interior was a draw, even before customers had seen any merchandise.

These displays differed from the kinds of window displays that would grace the windows of department stores at the turn of the twentieth century. There were no staged scenes or mannequins. Instead, these windows were an homage to the goods themselves.

⁴⁷ Joel H. Ross, *What I Saw in New York* (Auburn, NY: Derby & Miller, 1851), 176.

⁴⁸ On techniques of showing goods in the late 18th and early 19th century see Ann Smart Martin, “Ribbons of Desire: Gendered Stories in the World of Goods,” in *Gender, Taste and Material Culture in Britain and North America, 1700-1830* ed., Amanda Vickery and John Styles, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 179-200.

⁴⁹ Hunt quote in Beal, “Selling Gotham,” 494.

⁵⁰ Glenn & Co., *Catalogue of London, Paris, Leipsic, Vienna and other Fancy and Useful Articles Imported by Glenn & Co. and for sale at their great depot, No. 180 Chesnut Street, Opposite the Masonic Hall, Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: T&G Town, Printers, No 120 Chestnut Street, 1853). The company was apparently not exaggerating, and to prove their integrity they published a newspaper review of the store in their catalogue. Leach argues that this kind of change in retail environments did not take place until the 1890s. See Leach, *Land of Desire*, 72.

Fabrics were artfully draped, rolled and stacked in the window. Interior walls displayed row upon row of silver-plated tea urns, coffee pots, plates and dishes, that reached from floor to ceiling. Paper hangings were pasted on shop walls and in windows, providing fascinated customers with pictures of pastoral scenes or renaissance palaces that only hinted at what else was rolled up and stacked within. In all, these displays pointed to the love affair that mid century Americans had with domestic objects of all kinds. Small wonder that shop keepers stocked their store windows full of goods, when the middle-class shopper aspired to a home that had knick-knacks and objet d'art on every surface.⁵¹ But these displays also tell us something of how the mid century retailer imagined the urban consumer. The shop-keepers of New York and Philadelphia believed that their window-shoppers were connoisseurs, who could be enticed with artfully arranged goods in a sophisticated setting. Historian Richard Bushman has argued that the colonial shopper was both served and educated by the urban retailer in the eighteenth century. By mid-nineteenth century a new element had entered that relationship. Retailers who arranged their stores in this way hoped also to impress and entice their shoppers, who were no longer innocent of the fruits of commercial culture.⁵²

While most retailers stopped at new techniques of display, some went even further. Ahead of his time in this respect was Alexander T. Stewart, whose massive department retail store in New York was a marvel in its own right as well as the exception to the rule in the 1840s. His "marble palace" established in 1846, made Stewart the first "merchant prince of New York." He bought the frontage on Broadway between

⁵¹ Nancy Dunlap Bercaw, "Solid Objects/Mutable Meanings: Fancywork and the Construction of Bourgeois Culture, 1840-1880," *Winterthur Portfolio* 26 (Winter, 1991): 231-47.

⁵² Richard Bushman, "Shopping and Advertising in Colonial America" in *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century*, ed., Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 235.

Chambers and Reade Streets, just north of City Hall. On this lot, he erected a five storey marble building which would become the largest dry-goods store in New York.⁵³ The store and its gleaming white front, quickly became a phenomenon, employing hundreds of clerks and attracting thousands of eager customers. [Fig. 5.3] Stewart's was the first structure in New York specifically designed as a retail store and he organized it in a revolutionary way. He divided the store into several different departments, each selling a specialized line of goods. Silks, dress goods, laces, shawls, suits, calicoes and more, all had their own counters made from mahogany and maple, as well as their own specialized clerks, cash boys and porters. As clerks were instructed to allow customers to browse freely, a consumer was at liberty to wander about the store, gazing at the lavish displays of expensive goods.⁵⁴ As Stewart's marble emporium suggests, by the 1850s, shops had begun to be designed to tempt consumers to purchase in new ways, once again emphasizing the conceptualization of the consumer as an individual to be enticed and whose desires deserved attention.

As well as altering the appearance of their stores to appeal to consumers, retailers also began to employ personnel to attend more directly to the individual's requirements as a shopper. Clerks moved out of accounting rooms and on to shop floors, where their task was to see to the needs of customers. This new relationship did not always please the impatient young clerks. Henry Southworth Clay, a clerk in Ira Beard's millinery shop on William Street in New York complained bitterly about the time he had to spend in waiting on customers. "Miss Gooden of Bridgeport, Conn[ecticut] came into town," he

⁵³ Joseph Devorkin, *Great Merchants of Early New York, 'The Ladies Mile'* (New York: The Society for the Architecture of the City, 1987), 44-45. Note that Devorkin dates the establishment of the store to 1848 but all other sources date it to 1846.

⁵⁴ Beal, "Selling Gotham," 498. See also Stephen N. Elias, *Alexander T. Stewart: The Forgotten Merchant Prince* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992), 60, 62-63; Cantor, "A Monument of Trade," 165-168.

noted in his diary in June 1850. “[S]he is quite a troublesome customer occupying about two days in buying about \$60 worth of goods, it falls to my lot to wait upon her, but I exercise patience and manage to get along, but I think if I should have to attend upon many such people I should quit the trade in disgust.”⁵⁵ While clerks like Southworth often complained that customers, particularly their female ones, dithered and wasted time, this new relationship suggests not only that customers were dealing with a greater variety of goods but that shop owners sought to provide more thoroughly for the individual customer’s whims.⁵⁶

In part, retailers were responding to customers who had a better knowledge of what constituted good quality, choice and affordability, because customers could simply visit more shops in the 1840s than they could have done thirty years earlier.⁵⁷ As the city directories show, retail trade in New York had proliferated. In 1800, for example, the city had only one fancy store listed, by 1845 that number stood at 258. Indeed, retailers recognized consumers as both knowledgeable and discerning rather than bewildered by all this choice. But the retailer’s response to the consumer was also conditioned by the commercial lens through which they reconceived of shoppers. Clerks like Southworth were not just dealing with the shopper who came in to the store to buy for themselves but also the client who bought items to re-sell in a variety of different contexts. The amount of goods Miss Gooden bought for example, suggests that she was a milliner, not a woman

⁵⁵ Henry Southworth Clay, *Diary*, vol. 1, (June 3, 1850), N-YHS. See also *New York City Directory*, ed., Rode (New York: Rode, 1851-1852), 48 for the identification of Ira Beard’s Millinery store.

⁵⁶ See for example William Hoffman *Diary*, (Jan. 7, 1849), N-YHS. Also Asa Greene, *The Perils of Pearl Street Including a Taste of the Dangers of Wall Street, by a Late Merchant* (New York: Betts & Anstice and Peter Hill, 1834), 25-32. See also Brian Luskey, “The Marginal Men: Merchant’s Clerks and Society in Northeastern United States, 1790-1860,” (PhD., Diss. Emory University, 2004).

⁵⁷ See Appendices 9 and 10 in Beal, “Selling Gotham.” It is worth noting that the retail sector did not grow disproportionately during this time span. Retail and wholesale constituted 17% of all occupations in 1800 and 18% by 1845. Fancy goods retailers did however become a larger proportion of the retail trade, rising from 0.07% in 1800 to 2.23% of all retail trades by 1845.

who planned to finish a single bonnet of her own. Dealing with a growing commercial culture, as well as an expanding print culture that facilitated the spread of knowledge about fashionable new goods, it was easy for store-keepers and clerks to attend to their urban customers assuming that they had a significant level of experience and familiarity with the world of consumption that had to be respected and catered to.

However, clerks' attentiveness did not always garner good press. As early as 1830, suspicious husbands and fathers had started to refer to clerks as "counter jumpers," condemning them for their too close attention to female shoppers. Representations of clerks as lascivious and overly attentive became more common as the decades progressed.⁵⁸ But even this kind of representation simply emphasized that customers, particularly female ones, were fast becoming the focus of attention in fresh ways. Indeed, the expanding retail trade now provided something more: an awareness that to be a customer entitled an individual to special consideration. Unlike shoppers fifty years earlier, customers at mid-century could experience their needs being catered to and their desires being validated in new and exciting ways.

Retailers were not the only ones paying attention to the consumer. By the 1850s, credit rating agencies watched customers closely to assess the credit worthiness of any given business.⁵⁹ In 1841, when Lewis Tappan began his commercial intelligence office, his goal had been to provide trustworthy information on men and their business prospects to any one who needed to know. This could include investors or bankers, both domestic and foreign, who were anxious about lending or investing money with unknown partners. It could include merchants and wholesalers who were unsure as to whether the retailer

⁵⁸ Luskey, "The Marginal Men," 209-221.

⁵⁹ On the history and role of credit rating agencies in America see Scott Sandage, *Born Losers. A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 99-128.

they wanted to sell to would repay their debt. It could even encompass a retailer worried whether his customer could pay for all the goods he had ordered. At a time when business was becoming increasingly less personal, and introductions and vouchsafes were becoming more rare, Tappan's agency was the answer many were looking for. The testament to its success was its own long life and the large number of competitors that sprang up shortly thereafter.⁶⁰

It was the means of gathering this commercial information that gave the consumer yet further power. By the mid 1850s, R.G. Dun, Tappan's successor, employed hundreds of men to gather information on businesses and record their own observations, as well as document scraps of news and commercial rumors in the company's large red ledgers. Included in these reams of scrutiny were the clerks' and agents' impressions of the class of customers any given business might attract. Thus, an 1854 assessment of Peterson and Humphrey, a company that sold carpets, included the comment, "[they] are a popular house and sell to a fashionable class of customer."⁶¹ This comment, along with others was intended to communicate the relative reliability of this firm for potential investors or creditors. Similarly, a glowing report on the hatters Leary & Co., who occupied retail space in Astor House on Broadway, also included commentary on the type of customer. "One of the most fashionable establishments in this city," noted the Dun & Co. clerk. "Rich and getting more so every year."⁶² A report on a jewelers and fancy goods store at 550 Broadway was even more direct. "Doing the leading fashionable retail business with

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Report on Peterson and Humphrey, New York, vol. 192, p. 569, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Historical Collections, Baker Library, Harvard University, (hereafter Dun Collection).

⁶² Report on Leary & Co., New York, vol. 228, p. 423, Dun Collection.

the best kind of customers[,] making money fast.” This astute clerk knew what he was talking about. The company in question was Tiffany & Co.⁶³

This kind of surveillance and reporting made retailers aware of how important the right kind of customer could be. By attracting the “best kind of customer” they were not only drawing in wealthy clients, but were also boosting their reputation, increasing their credit-worthiness and sharpening their competitive edge. As shops proliferated and the choice of stores became ever more bewildering, this kind of reputation could make or break a new business. By the 1850s then, the consumer imagined through a commercial lens was not only the center of attention, but a figure to be courted, attracted, enticed and scrutinized. The consumer was also a figure to be respected, no matter what they demanded or expected. Tales of long suffering clerks and frustrated store-owners abounded, as retailers struggled to accommodate the customer’s every whim. A satirical rendering of a shopping trip published in *Harper’s Weekly* suggested that women had better pick their items carefully since “the ‘establishment’ worn down by feminine caprice, has been compelled to announce that it cannot change any ‘article’ once selected more than *three* times.”⁶⁴ The clear implication was that retailers were going out of their way to be as obliging as possible, even to the point of absurdity. This long-suffering compliance only increased in times of financial downturn, tipping the scale even more in favor of the consumer. With its usual acuity, *Harper’s Weekly* rendered this discomforting dynamic into a succinct cartoon, where even the lowliest of shoppers gained new power in the wake of the Panic of 1857. [Fig. 5.4]

⁶³ Report on Tiffany & Co., New York, vol. 318, p. 308, Dun Collection.

⁶⁴ Prattle and Tattle, “A Dry-Goods Store,” *Harper’s Weekly*, May 23, 1857.

This attempt to capture the interest of the consumer extended far beyond the actual experience of shopping, spreading out into the realm of advertising in significant ways. Of course, shopkeepers' efforts to garner attention and cultivate reputation were not new. From the late eighteenth century onwards, shopkeepers had bought and circulated trade cards and produced advertisements that appealed to the "ladies and gentlemen" of the city, in an effort to produce and retain a loyal clientele.⁶⁵ But the 1840s and 50s saw an expansion as well as several new developments in retail advertising. The expansion was due largely to technological innovations in printing. The arrival of lithography in America in 1825 had opened up new possibilities for commercial printing. The ability to create tonal rather than line prints allowed printed ephemera like trade cards, bill heads and broadsides to take on new sophistication. By the 1840s, the invention of the electrotpe machine provided printers with the ability to produce thousands of copies of their adverts at a relatively lower cost. As a result, advertising in many forms became a newly widespread medium, which pervaded urban and rural landscapes alike.⁶⁶ Shopkeepers attempted to make the most of this new means of approaching customers. To their delight, their new methods proved successful. "John & Myself distributed Bills again through several streets," wrote a young and weary clerk from Albany in 1848. After several days of handing out adverts for his employer's store he went on to note, their efforts had paid off. "Today the customers came – the Bills we

⁶⁵ Richard Bushman, "Shopping and Advertising in Colonial America" in *Of Consuming Interests* ed. Carson et al., 233-251.

⁶⁶ *Prints and Printmakers of New York State, 1825-1940*, ed., David Tatham, (Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 4-6.

left at different places began to take effect... everything in the store was pulled apart, a great rush.”⁶⁷

In fact, retailers had begun to take notice of advertising in new ways by the 1840s, a interest that grew stronger over the course of the 1860s and 70s. One indication of this new interest was Volney B. Palmer’s efforts to create a professional advertising agency in 1841. Palmer himself began his career acting as a middleman between newspaper publishers and advertisers across the country, helping merchants to get their ads into newspapers. But in 1849, Palmer improved upon his services by creating his own newspaper, dedicated to the needs of men who wanted to advertise. In *V.B Palmer’s Register and Spirit of the Press*, Palmer developed a system of advertising which helped advertisers choose their best medium and regional market and then place their advert in the newspapers or periodicals that they believed would best match their needs.⁶⁸ At the same time, Palmer vigorously promoted advertising in his own newspaper, culling quotes from around the country to promote his business and prove his case. Quoting from the *Boston Star*, Palmer’s periodical trumpeted: “[n]othing is more clearly settled, or more universally admitted than that the best money spent by a business man is that paid for advertising. The fact has been demonstrated throughout the world.”⁶⁹ Palmer’s initiatives were an attempt to create a wider commercial network of retailers and customers. But, his work also suggested to retailers that there was a larger regional community of consumers, ready to be appealed to, who shared common interests, were interested in similar goods and could all be persuaded to buy in a similar fashion.

⁶⁷ William Hoffman *Diary*, (Apr. 14, 1848), N-YHS.

⁶⁸ The first major national advertising agency, N.W. Ayers of Philadelphia, descended directly from Palmer’s efforts. See Mimi L. Minnick, “N.W. Ayers Finding Aid,” N.W. Ayer Advertising Agency Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Washington D.C.

⁶⁹ “Advertising,” *V.B Palmer’s Register*, vol. 1 (Oct. 1849).

Palmer improved on his methods over the years. By 1851, when he began to publish his more sophisticated *New Yorker*, Palmer promised clients that he would write, place and monitor an advertisement in any newspaper or periodical he represented. The newspaper, which cost \$2.00 per year, not only listed the “best and most widely circulated newspapers” in which to advertise, but also offered low rates that only Palmer’s customers could get.⁷⁰ But a great deal of Palmer’s work was convincing business owners that advertising could provide lucrative rewards. Palmer’s own puffing of the advertising trade suggests that the idea of systematically appealing to the public for attention and patronage was one that still caused some hesitation among retailers in the late 1840s. Perhaps it was the cost, or perhaps it was simply that the idea of appealing to such a broad swath of people, organized by region or class, seemed risky to retailers who were used to selling to smaller local communities. In fact, another form of advertising – the poster or broadside – suggests the difficulty that advertisers and retailers had with bridging the gap between the idea of a local and personally known clientele and a broader consuming public. Over the decades, broadside authors experimented with phrases that addressed “friends and customers” to the more impersonal “purchasers,” “the public generally” and on one occasion “citizens of the Western Reserve.”⁷¹ [Fig. 5.5 & 5.6]

There was not a specific progression from the personal to the impersonal in these broadsides of the early and mid nineteenth century. Rather, the multiple ways that

⁷⁰ *V.B. Palmer’s New Yorker*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Dec. 1851).

⁷¹ Chester Woolworth, *New Store! New Goods!* (Sandusky, Ohio: s.n., 1844); George C. Varney, *New-York Dry Goods Cash Store*, (Salem, Mass.: Printed at the Salem Gazette Office, 1839); Bucklin, Clark & Co., *Something New!* (Boston: Jenks, printer, 86 Hanover Street, 1850); Chamberlin & Co., *Cheap Cash Store* (Worcester, Mass.: Aegis Office, 1841); Franklin Reuben Elliot, *F.R Elliot Now Has For Sale*, (Hartford: Elihu Geer, 1839?); J.H Kibbee, *One Hundred Thousand Lbs of Prime New Orleans Sugar*, (Warren, Ohio; s.n., 1854); James Gordon and Sons, *New Goods!* (Peoria, N.Y.: s.n. 1867). All at the AAS.

advertisers chose to address shoppers indicates the extent to which the identity of the consumer was itself under consideration even as it was in flux.

That many retailers grappled with the question of whether the consumer was a personal acquaintance or simply part of a larger consuming public was in part a reflection of the changing reality of actually going shopping. The relationship that individual retailers had cultivated with long standing customers at the beginning of the century, was now merging into a new one as clerks in the 1850s waited on customers who were shopping in stores with multiple clerks and several floors.⁷² No matter how attentive clerks might be on one occasion or another, personal ties between shopper and shop-owner were beginning to fray. This process had certainly started earlier. In 1817, a clerk at Scott and Laurie's dry goods store had recorded the purchases of such clientele as "the pock mark girl" who owed 4/6, the "fat man for gloves" and the "little mulatto woman" among others.⁷³ Perhaps this was a clerk with a particularly cheeky sense of humor. Nonetheless, clerks and store owners were dealing with the increasing likelihood that they might not know their customers. The difficulty in finding a mode of address reflected this tension. While other trends in the retail trade suggested that retailers believed customers deserved more attention, with specific care lavished on their needs, larger numbers of customers caused a slow drift towards more impersonal shopping experiences where retailers treated customers in a more generic fashion. While retailers still retained personal relationships with their wealthiest customers and were always careful to keep tabs on their customers' credit, the figure of the urban middle-class shopper—parsed out in newspapers and other printed ephemera—began to take shape as a

⁷² Luskey, "The Marginal Men," 6-7, 209-217.

⁷³ See Scott and Laurie, Day Book, 1817-1820, N-YHS.

recognizable entity. Just as urban signs, newspapers and even currency helped create a new conception of an urban public that shared the reading of both these texts and the spaces that they occupied, the printed advertisements of the 1840s and 50s that they read as consumers also helped Americans envision and experience a connection to a consuming public community beyond their immediate social circle.⁷⁴ Anyone who read an advertisement had to be aware that it could appeal not only to their own interests but to the interests of the other people who read it. Encountering each other in shops and stores where similar products stood side by side reinforced that notion. Magazine articles detailing fashionable dress and books discussing home management and décor also suggested a shared material culture.⁷⁵ Perhaps newly aware that as shoppers their attention was courted and their wants looked after, individuals might also have begun to become aware that when they bought goods in this urban retail environment they shared that act and their desires for new goods with many other Americans.

These nebulous connections were reinforced by the ways in which consumers saw images of themselves reflected in the commercial lithography of the 1840s and 1850s. Of course the success of new printing technologies meant that Americans faced a panoply of images of themselves at mid century. The lithographed “city view” offered up tonal depictions of urban landscapes, providing artistic and accurate renditions of familiar buildings, monuments and edifices. As these views grew in popularity, Americans began to discover other representations of themselves and their world on sale. By 1840,

⁷⁴ For a brilliant discussion of this relationship between printed ephemera, public space and urban communities see Henkin, *City Reading* 6-24, 41-65, 70-98. See also Anderson *Imagined Communities*.

⁷⁵ The spread of publications like *Godey's Lady Book* and the popularity of works like Andrew Jackson Downing, *Cottage Residences, or a series of designs for rural cottages* (New York and London: Wiley and Putnam, 1842) are only two examples of how print culture enabled Americans to imagine a shared material culture.

dioramas and panoramic views vied with early daguerrotypes, and tintypes, offering ever more intriguing views of individuals and their landscapes. Pictorial magazines such as *Frank Leslie's Illustrated* and *Gleason's Pictorial Magazine* flourished, surrounding Americans with reflections of themselves and their society. But no single genre was more familiar or widespread than the commercial pictures of stores and city streets. They were the images that most lithographers produced to sustain their business from week to week.⁷⁶ These images appeared on trade cards and later as bill heads, in catalogues and city directories or framed and displayed at train stations or commercial hotels. But if these images existed in a wide variety of sizes and contexts, they were linked through their subject matter and style. A distinctive rendering of American retail stores, which displayed shop, goods and consumers in an elegant and orderly configuration, represented an emerging advertising genre that could perhaps be summed up as a “retailscape.”

These prints were always different in their details but they were united by common visual themes. A typical “retailscape” most often displayed the store frontage, emphasizing the signage and in particular the name of the business. Artists and lithographers also chose to show off the large expanses of glass windows through which the commodities on sale were clearly visible. Racks of silverware, bundles of textiles and rolls of wallpaper were all tantalizingly exhibited and made abundantly available again emphasizing the 1840s interest in the goods themselves. But the inclusion of shoppers in these images was perhaps the most notable innovation in these prints. While advertising from the 1800s and 1810s most often included iconography – ranging from boxes and

⁷⁶ Tatham, *Prints and Printmakers*, 2-3; Jenny Ambrose, “Picturing Factories and Storefronts: Mid-19th Century Advertising Lithographs.” Paper delivered at “Impressions of Philadelphia: The North American Print Conference, 2007” on Sept. 28, 2007 at the Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, PA.

bales to the more elaborate depictions of classical figures - these later images stood apart through their inclusion of everyday shoppers. [Fig 5.7 & 5.8] Figures strolled along the streets, browsing through the plethora of goods on offer. They cut deliberately elegant figures: well dressed, leisured, and identifiably middle-class. Although specific in their representation they were nonetheless anonymous in their uniformity.

It was the inclusion of consumers in these adverts, that set these images aside from other lithographs of the day. Unlike the “city view” that portrayed the scene from a bird’s eye vantage point, the “retailscape” invited the viewer into the landscape they were viewing. Collapsing the distance between the scene and the spectator erased any sense of detached observation. Thus these prints offered their observers a chance to identify directly with the scene and shoppers they saw, connecting the viewer to the imagined scene. Moreover, as these images proliferated, they moved further and further away from the point of their origin. While traditional “city views” were often bought by the residents of one particular city, these “retailsapes” traveled far and wide.⁷⁷ As trade cards and bill heads they moved from retailer to consumer, circling out from their original location. As fliers they were posted and sent throughout the city and as images in catalogues they traveled across cities to small towns and country retail stores, providing the scenes with wide audiences, that were invited to aspire to the lives lived by the consumers in the picture.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ For the local circulation of the “city views” see Smith Brothers Subscription Book, Box 1, *Philadelphia Views*, Book 1, 3, 4 and Box 1, *New York Views*, Book 1 and 2, Smith Brothers Collection, AAS.

⁷⁸ A broad range of catalogues existed at mid-century. Some were intended simply for country retailers but others were sent directly to consumers as promotional gifts to be kept and referred back to again and again. Some companies like Foster & Lee, used their catalogues to replace the agents they had previously employed to sell their furniture. See Foster & Lee, *Foster & Lee, Furniture Dealers, No. 35 Bowery, New York* (New York: Excelsior Book and Job Printing Office, 211, 213 & 215 Centre Street, 1857). Examples of all these publications with “retailsapes” were published in the 1850s.

This identification was of course limited by race and class. The shoppers in these pictures were always white. The conception of black shoppers in the northern urban context was one that was either resolutely ignored or lampooned mercilessly in satirical print. As early as the 1820s, middle-class African American shoppers were viciously mocked in a series of cartoons produced by Philadelphia artist Edward W. Clay. His series, "Life in Philadelphia," targeted the social aspirations of the more prosperous free black population of the Quaker City, making fun of their efforts to participate in the burgeoning culture of white bourgeois retail fashion.⁷⁹ One particularly damning image depicts an overdressed African-American woman asking her equally over-dressed male friend what he "tinks" of her "new poke bonnet." The hat she is referring to is so large that it hides her face, creating a ludicrous profile. The joke is made more vicious still, when her companion "Frederick Augustus" replies that he doesn't like it because he can no longer see her face and distinguish her from other "she niggers." Clay's image worked on several levels. It certainly mocked fashionable culture in general, teasing those consumers who bought trendy styles that were impractical and excessive. Behind the teasing was an accusation that without good taste, white consumers were no better than African-Americans and thus just as contemptible. But the real venom was directed against African-Americans who sought to become a part of that culture, spending their money on goods that were a part of fashionable culture but could never give them access to that society and respectability. Frederick Augustus' comment is also a cruel reminder that no matter how hard African-American consumers tried, they would always be simply "niggers," indistinguishable from one another for middle-class white men and women.

⁷⁹ The full set of E.W. Clay's prints from 1828 and 1830 can be found at the Library Company of Philadelphia. For more on Clay see Nancy R. Davison, "E.W. Clay: American political caricaturist of the Jacksonian Era," (Ph.D. Diss., University of Michigan, 1980).

[Fig. 5.9] For African-Americans, consumption was not a tool they could use to develop personal style of individual identities.

Clay's vicious humor could translate into violent backlash against prosperous African-Americans. In August 1834, white working class Philadelphians launched a huge three day attack on the prosperous and influential free black community in the city. This hostility was in part the physical manifestation of the resentment that poorer whites felt against the "dressy blacks and dandy colored beaux and belles," who could claim cultural capital beyond their means.⁸⁰ These exclusions were not always enacted by an enraged mob. Charles Haswell, an author looking back over his time in New York, recalled an incident from 1825, which suggests just how seriously individual white consumers took African-American attempts to partake of the consumer culture they arrogantly assumed to be their own.

Passing up Broadway in the winter of 1825-6 at the northern corner of Vesey Street, I witnessed in great part the following scene...a man, well dressed and of presentable appearance, had dragged a chinchilla hat from off the head of a negress, stamped on it, and then threw it into the gutter, where it was rapidly borne down the street. Upon being questioned why he had done it, he replied: "I have just paid eighteen dollars for a chinchilla hat for my sister, and I don't mean that any nigger-wench shall wear one like it, while I know it."⁸¹

Thus while Clay's female figure had been an object of fun, the woman that Haswell saw that day had been physically assaulted as a result of her choice. For Clay and Haswell, the lesson offered was that no matter how well African-Americans attempted to integrate themselves into the middle-class world of consumer goods, their efforts would not enable

⁸⁰ Emma Jones Lapsansky, "'Since They Got Those Separate Churches': Afro-Americans and Racism in Jacksonian Philadelphia," *American Quarterly*, 32 (Spring 1980): 54-78; quote on p. 62 from John Fanning Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia* (1830): 479. See also Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 254-258.

⁸¹ Charles H. Haswell, *Reminiscences of New York by an Octogenarian* (New York: Harper, 1896), 181.

them to assimilate into the polite culture of American urban life. The power to purchase would not after all erase racial difference.⁸²

Similarly, although far less violently, the commercial images of the day sought to distinguish between the leisured consumer and the laboring man or woman, suggesting that despite their economic reliance on one another, they nonetheless occupied separate social and cultural arenas. Lithographer W. H. Rease neatly articulated this division through his graphic designs. [Fig. 5.10] In his “retailsapes,” he usually depicted cartmen hard at work, focused on loading or unloading commodities; their backs turned on the middle-class shoppers who, in turn, had their eyes turned towards the rows of goods lining the store windows. The juxtaposition of laborers and shoppers drew a visual boundary around the parameters of the consumer community. Lacking time, money and gentility, the working man was visually separated from the precincts of the middle-class store, despite the fact that his labor made him an intrinsic part of retail culture.

Similarly, depictions of the store’s interiors reinforced these distinctions. These were scenes that were insulated from the point of production and instead furnished to look like private domestic interiors. In these spaces the middle class culture of drawing room prevailed. Quiet conversation – only possible in salesrooms where machinery did not clank and workers were not busy – replaced the noisier environment of workshop and retail space combined. Tables and chairs echoed the intimacy of *tete-a-tetes* shared on

⁸² It is important to note that white middle-class consumers might have seen all African-American purchases as an effort to integrate but that did not mean that all African-American communities were attempting to assimilate into white middle-class culture. Ira Berlin points to this stratifying free black culture in the north, with an educated black middle-class cultivating a culture that more closely echoed white middle-class culture, and a black working class culture that was more “boisterous and colorful.” See Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 110-111, 122-123.

sofas, around tea tables.⁸³ In short, the depictions of shop interiors reinforced the idea that only those with middle-class habits and sensibilities would be able to navigate the maturing retail culture of the 1840s and 50s. [Fig. 5.11] The visual vocabulary of Rease's lithographs as well as the arrangement of the interiors of urban stores suggest that the emerging retail culture of the 1840s was in itself a means by which individuals could assert their claims to middle-class status. By engaging in a certain way with the practice of shopping, American men and women could assume a genteel sensibility that marked them out as middle-class. By moving through these spaces as knowledgeable shoppers, being courted and waited on by clerks and store-owners, perusing and eventually buying the items that signaled domesticity and refinement was certainly a way for Americans to lay claim to a middle-class status and for those same citizens to ascertain who shared that status.

Finally, these kinds of images and appeals also helped reinforce the idea that the ideal middle-class consumer was female. In eighteenth and early nineteenth century discussions of consumption, the female consumer had been a dangerous individual, marked out as the usual perpetrator of reckless and excessive consumption.⁸⁴ Although the idea that female consumers could easily become more extravagant than men did not disappear a mid-century, there was a shift in the representation of female consumers and middle-class Americans were presented with the idea that women shoppers were legitimately virtuous individuals in their own right. Lithographers depicted female consumers in these adverts as the very epitome of urban taste and refinement. The

⁸³ See also Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class*, 238.

⁸⁴ Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects*, 3-5. This idea that women could not control themselves around consumer goods persisted into the late nineteenth century, see Elaine Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

women's gentility as consumers helped cultivate the idea that the public arena of the marketplace could be domesticated and infused with a sophistication that equaled anything that Europe had to offer. Men who subscribed to this domestication of the marketplace were not excluded, if anything they were encouraged to follow the female lead. In fact, it is important not to over-emphasize the feminization of the American consumer. The image of the neatly dressed male consumer was in many ways just as present in the ubiquitous depictions of urban retail spaces. In the commercial images, men too strolled past plate glass windows, bent over counters and were waited on by clerks, wearing their uniform of long dark coat and tall dark hat.

Moreover, it seems that this depiction matched up to experience. Returning for one moment to Caroline Barrett-White, the wealthy Brookline wife, it is important to note that her husband, Francis White, not only went with her to look for carpets, but also did a great deal of shopping for both his wife and himself. Dresses and books were items that Caroline herself received as gifts from him, but he also bought a clock, a mirror, landscape paintings, a daguerreotype and even a gold pencil.⁸⁵ He also bought all the household furniture and a piano, all without his wife (in fact he took her to see the items the day after he bought them, although Caroline, according to her diary believed she was responsible for helping to choose them!)⁸⁶ Yet, in their adherence to drawing room standards, men too helped to domesticate the urban shopping precincts of New York and Philadelphia.

⁸⁵ For the dress see, (May 26, 1853) and the book, (May 21, 1853) *Diary*, vol. 4. The other items are evidenced by the bills in the "Miscellaneous Folder," Caroline Barrett-White Papers, AAS.

⁸⁶ For her description of both the move and her own purchase of household goods see (Dec. 8, 1855), (Dec. 10, 1855), (Dec. 12, 1855), *Diary*, vol. 6 and (Dec. 18, 1855), (Dec. 19, 1855), (Dec. 21, 1855) and (Dec. 24, 1855), *Diary*, vol. 7, Caroline Barrett-White Papers, AAS. The date of purchase of the furniture is on the bill entitled "Bought of A.A Beal" dated December 11, 1855 and is in Francis White's name. See Miscellaneous Folder, Caroline Barrett-White Papers, AAS.

Nonetheless, the idealization of the female consumer was connected to a preference among retailers and advertisers for cultivating a marketplace for the middle-class. The retailers' efforts to introduce domesticity to the marketplace was in part an effort to create an attractive and familiar environment for middle-class shoppers, encouraging the wealthy to spend their money.⁸⁷ But the domestication of the marketplace was also an attempt by retailers to combat the dangers of the growing urban marketplace where customers were no longer familiar, confidence scams were common and deception and fraud were the biggest problems facing any businessman. Retailers may have hoped that the introduction of domesticity to the marketplace would help them identify the frauds and fakes, who would be tripped up by the rituals of polite culture. As historian Karen Halttunen has explained in reference to parlor culture; politeness, tact and sentimental acquaintanceship became the means that middle-class families used to screen out the social riff-raff. Retailers hoped the same tools would allow them to spot the shoppers who planned to run up bills they would never pay or "shove" counterfeit notes

⁸⁷ The construction of a domestic sphere for and by middle-class women has been well documented. For the best work that describes the dimensions of the domestic sphere within the private space of the household see Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* 3rd ed. (1982; repr., Chicago: Illini, 1987), 155-168; Mary Ryan, *The Cradle of the Middle-Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). For works that have looked more specifically at the ways in which the domestic sphere was constructed outside of the home see Lori Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics and Class in the Nineteenth Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); on domesticity's national and imperial dimension see Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catherine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New York: Norton, 1973) and Amy Kaplan, "Manifest Domesticity," *American Literature* 70 'No More Separate Spheres' (Sep. 1998): 581-606. For an account of how literary sources have constructed the domestic sphere as filled with consumer goods as a form of sentimental materialism see Lori Merish, "The Hand of Refined Taste" in the Frontier Landscape: Caroline Kirkland's 'A New Home, Who'll Follow?' and the Feminization of American Consumerism," *American Quarterly* 45 (1993): 485-523. On the ways in which department stores in the 1890s were made into female spaces see Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

into their tills.⁸⁸ Of course, the domestication of the marketplace didn't guarantee success. Henry Southworth, the millinery store clerk jotted down one such cautionary tale in 1851:

[Mr. Paddon] related to me a curious incident which transpired a few days ago...it seems (a lady) I mean to write a female called at his store and ordered certain articles...[to be] sent home a certain day. The articles were sent and the boy who carried was requested to call the next day for the pay[,] accordingly he done so, but when he did call he was informed that the Lady was married and had left town the previous day, while he was there several Bills were presented for payment and refused, it seems she had run up Bills for her wedding dress, confectionary, false hair &c &c and a large bond Bill, she had passed her self off for a rich person and had succeeded in catching a husband, who is a clerk in a dry goods store receiving a salary of \$800 a year, I pity the poor fellow.⁸⁹

Yet retailers continued to cultivate the environment and habits that reflected a middle-class marketplace, perhaps in the hopes that these refinements would protect them from being swindled.

Despite retailers' beliefs that they could domesticate the marketplace and entice only the well to do shoppers, the reality was that the boundaries of the marketplace were permeable and messy. Cities like Philadelphia and New York made it possible for a broad swath of people to interact with one another, in ways that blurred class lines. Clerks who waited on customers at lunch time could join the throng of shoppers on Broadway after dinner time.⁹⁰ Mechanics might pull on their coats after leaving their workshops and become indistinguishable from store owners and clerks as they passed through fashionable shopping districts.⁹¹ The daughter of a genteel family which had fallen on hard times, might be mistaken for a seamstress and vice versa. Indeed the consumer

⁸⁸ On confidence men see Haltunnen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*; on counterfeit notes see Stephen Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 209-259.

⁸⁹ Henry Southworth Clay, *Diary* (Jul. 9, 1851).

⁹⁰ Henry Southworth Clay, *Diary* (Jan 21, 1851), (Feb 5, 1851), and (June 21, 1851); Edward Neufville Tailer, *Diary*, (May 18, 1850) N-YHS and Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class*, 238.

⁹¹ Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class*, 142.

goods and shopping practices that could signal middle-class status could be appropriated by individuals who did not have the other markers of class such as professional status, wealth or property. Moreover, the neatly bounded physical urban spaces depicted in the commercial lithographs and advertising images did not match up to the reality of the city. A thriving second-hand economy gave less wealthy consumers access to a wide variety of consumer goods. In New York for example, residents knew that Chatham Street and the Bowery was the neighborhood where cheap second hand clothing stores, slop shops and pawnbrokers abounded. Although observers condemned the trade as cheap and flashy, these areas nonetheless provided the less well off with access to consumer goods, that were at least new to them.⁹² William Bobo, a visiting South Carolinian, directed those who wished to get better prices on hats and clothes to Canal and Hudson streets, dismissing Broadway as the place where only the “tens” and the “strangers” traded.⁹³ And despite the distinctive retail districts, these areas were not neatly divided and consumers of all classes and kinds could pass back and forth between these different worlds. Francis White, Caroline Barrett-White’s husband, made extra money for himself by selling his clothes to a second hand clothes shop and aspiring middle class families went to auctions to “furnish their house.”⁹⁴

In fact, despite the ease with which the middle-class consumer was constructed graphically by advertisers and commercial lithographers and given substance by the

⁹² James Dabney McCabe, *Lights and Shadows of New York Life* (1872: reprint, New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1970), 190. “Slop shops” was the name given to men’s ready made clothing stores.

⁹³ Bobo, *Glimpses of New York*, 125. “Tens” was probably slang for “ton” referring to the older phrase “the bon ton” meaning the elite people of fashion.

⁹⁴ Francis A. White, “Private Expenses: April 19, 1845 to April 19, 1845” Miscellaneous Folder, Caroline Barrett White Papers, AAS. On the auction see “How We Furnished Our House” *Harper’s Weekly*, Apr. 3, 1858. For an excellent account of how pawnbroking fit into the second hand economies of nineteenth century America see Wendy Woloson, “In Hock. Pawning in Early America,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 27 (Spring 2007). See also Stansell, *City of Women*, 51-52.

commercial culture they depicted, contemporary observers often expressed their anxiety that they had could not always identify who was middle-class and who was an imposter on a daily basis. Yet, commercial literature and images, visible in both public and private spaces across the mid-Atlantic, continued to reinforce the idea that white middle-class consumers constituted an imagined community of American shoppers. For broad swaths of urban and rural consumers, the commercial images and advertising appeals provided a shared language of consumption, one that allowed individuals to classify their shopping experiences and interpret them as part of a shared culture of manners, practices, aspirations and ideals. By the 1850s then, urban middle-class citizens were familiar with the values and practices of genteel consumption, and used those practices as best they could to exclude the working-class and racially different from their middle-class community. In a world where the realities of living in a democratic polity were unpleasant, chaotic and sometimes downright dangerous, this alternative vision of the wider community provided both a comforting fantasy and a useful means of excluding the unwanted citizens from an imagined community.⁹⁵

This vision took on an added importance as middle-class hopes of domesticating and refining urban public space were constantly challenged. This was particularly the case in New York, where the city's wealthy middle classes constantly competed with the urban masses for space and precedence on the confines of Manhattan, a competition that

⁹⁵ The anxiety antebellum Americans expressed about the democratization of their political system and culture is well documented. For political anxiety, particularly on the rise of the mob, see Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 411, 430-439; David Grimsted, "Rioting in its Jacksonian Setting," *American Historical Review* 77 (1972): 361-397; on fear of the working class see Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points: The 19th-Century New York City Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum* (New York: Free Press, 2001). On pervasive fears about being unable to distinguish between "genteel and trustworthy" and "working class trickster" see Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*.

manifested itself most dramatically in the Astor Place Riots in 1849. When working class crowds violently protested the performance of elite-favored British actor William Charles Macready, pushing instead for their favorite, Edwin Forrest, troops were called out to restore order, who opened fire and killed twenty-two people. While Macready performed that night, the Astor Place Opera House closed only three years later.⁹⁶ Faced with these cultural failures, urban elites speculated nervously about the significance of these shortcomings. As historian Sven Beckert has noted, the mercantile elite in particular were “eager to disprove Alexis De Tocqueville’s assertion two decades earlier that ‘in few of the civilized nations of our time...have great artists, distinguished poets, or celebrated writers been more rare.’”⁹⁷ Attempting to find new ways to assert a national culture, one that was both splendid enough to compete with Europe, yet democratic enough to fit America, some citizens chose to manifest their cultural superiority through their consumption.

One of the most dramatic efforts at this was the lavish piece of puffery assembled by the Reverend Charles E. Lester in 1854. Taking some of New York’s most successful businesses, he set about praising these establishments, coupling his tributes with poetry and artistic prints that could be cut out and kept. The high cultural tone of the entire book, reflected Lester’s belief that American society was reaching a new pinnacle in terms of national taste and sophistication. Thus his admiration for jewelry company Ball, Black and Co. described the gold and silver tea sets that were available as “thoroughly American...[with] none of the air of servility about them – Europeans stopped to gaze on

⁹⁶ See Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis*, 46-51; see also Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/ Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 63-68.

⁹⁷ Alexis De Tocqueville, quoted in Beckert, *Monied Metropolis*, 50.

them for they breathed the Spirit of our Nationality.”⁹⁸ Lester was impressed that these items had been made in America. But unlike the boosters at the Franklin and American Institutes, Lester did not think that an item had to be made in America for it to reflect a national quality, nor did he restrict consumers who wished to shop patriotically to American made goods. In fact, in his book he praised just as many stores who brought in imported items, such as clothing or carpets. For Lester, the American quality of the item lay in its widespread availability.

In fact, if anything, Lester expressed an even greater admiration for the businesses that imported fine goods into the country. Describing the imported carpets of Betts, Kelleher and Betts he congratulated Americans on the democratization of their consumption, noting that “[h]ere the plain house or chaste cottage of the working man can be adorned and made comfortable with small means; while the opulent can gratify the most cultivated and refined taste. The ‘iron-age’ of the Republic has gone by – and opulence is drawing around us curtains of silk and gold.”⁹⁹ This widespread access to high quality new goods was something that Lester saw as uniquely American. He believed he lived in “an age of luxury” and that this new epoch had been ushered in by “Democracy.” But for Lester, democracy was not simply about political representation. It was expressed through material wealth and widespread luxury. His equation of domestic luxury to personal independence left his reader in no doubt that this widespread prosperity and refinement was a unique feature of the American republic. In no other country might you find, for example, “Hiram Anderson – *the Carpet Merchant of the People*.” Indeed, Lester’s book of advertising was a striking example of a new American

⁹⁸ C. Edwards Lester, *Glances at the metropolis: a hundred illustrated gems* (New York: I.D Guyer, 1854), 9.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 29

understanding of consumption: to be able to buy whatever you like, regardless of where it had been made or even what it was, was a uniquely American ability.¹⁰⁰ Of course, Lester's vision was both aspiration and fiction. Many Americans in the 1840s and 50s, particularly in the poor immigrant areas of New York, were struggling to make ends meet, with no spare money to buy carpets, however cheap. Yet the idea that access to these kinds of goods was unique to living in the United States proved to a powerful and pervasive fantasy, one that continued to resonate in American culture.¹⁰¹

As retailers and advertisers connected genteel consumption to a vision of a domesticated democracy, middle-class demands and desires took on a new political valence. By the 1840s, proponents of free trade appropriated the rhetoric which linked American tastes and access to cheaper goods to an expression of American democracy and used it to champion the abolition of tariffs. The first step in this argument was to take the retailers' respect for the middle-class public's taste seriously and frame it as a demand that could not be denied in the American democratic marketplace. This attitude toward the public's taste was a significant intellectual shift. While the problem of American taste had always been one connected to the issue of national strength and identity for cultural elites, discussions in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century concerning the question of American taste had not focused on consumer goods as much as it had revolved around cultural production. It was the absence of American literature, theater and language that had really concerned cultural nationalists like of Noah Webster,

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* 65, 89, 99. See also 47 for women's fashions.

¹⁰¹ See Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic. The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003)

Benjamin Rush in the post-Revolutionary period.¹⁰² Of course, anxiety that Americans did not have their own culture had spilled over into the realm of fashion, manners and goods. Indeed, in their efforts to cultivate an American aesthetic, Rush and Webster had shown a marked disgust for all things stylistically British. Thus when discussing American taste as it pertained to consumption, which to all intents and purposes meant the consumption of imported European goods, cultural nationalists had urged abstention and restraint upon the public.

In the 1820s, as American manufacturing had matured, the anxiety over American taste had become the province of manufacturers and protectionists, who were concerned that Americans preferred foreign manufactured goods to the ones they were able to produce domestically. As the efforts of organizations such as the Franklin and American Institutes suggested, the problem as they saw it, was teaching Americans that they were able to buy the kinds of goods they wanted while still supporting the producers of the U.S. economy. The Institutes imagined that all they had to do was to help provide Americans with the goods that could compete with the European imports, thus making domestic producers, the first choice of American consumers. However, when simple availability had failed to attract consumers, the Institutes, and in particular the Franklin Institute, turned their attention to the task of training American consumers to have a taste for American-made goods. Yet that project too had met with failure. In the end, the

¹⁰² See Lawrence J. Friedman, *Inventors of the Promised Land* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1975), 3-75. The Anglicization of American culture before the Revolution that these men worried about has been well documented by John Murrin and T.H Breen. See John Murrin, "A Roof Without Walls: The Dilemma of American National Identity," in *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and American National Identity* ed. Richard Beeman et al. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 333-349 and T.H Breen, "The Baubles of Britain: The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* 119 (May 1988): 73-104.

protectionists' vision of American consumers and their taste was cast in the mold of restriction, restraint and constant re-education, a model that had never been popular.

This was not the case for those proponents of free trade. Taking their cue from the vision of the newly powerful consumer, advocates of free trade suggested that the American consumer, along with their tastes and desires should be respected and attended to in their own right. This argument was certainly helped by the new conception of the consumer but as a political argument the free trade vision of the consumer had its roots in the 1830s. In 1833, as a way of abating the effects of the Tariff of 1828, Calhoun and Clay had engineered a compromise on tariffs, which would gradually lower the tariff in increments for the next eight years, bringing it down to a 20 per cent duty across the board. The end of the nullification crisis in fact marked a shift away from broad public support for protectionism.¹⁰³ The success of American manufacturing through the 1820s had convinced many that American industry was no longer in its infancy and did not require such stringent protections. But even this gradual reduction was too slow for some free traders. Freeman Hunt, editor of *The Merchants Magazine*, opined in 1841 that “every man finds his commonest pleasures increased by the productions of other countries....the table on which we eat is probably of wood grown in South America; the cloth which covers it is from Ireland; the cups from which we drink are from China or England; the knives in part from Liverpool and in part from the deserts of Africa; the spoons from the mines of Mexico; the coffee which we sip is from the distant island of Java; the sugar which suits it so admirably to our taste from the island of Cuba.” His point, of course, was that since middle-class American consumers enjoyed these items

¹⁰³Walker-Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 407-410. See also Taussig, *The Tariff History of the United States*, 104-106.

daily, they should not be hindered by the government in effecting their purchase. With this argument, Freeman Hunt bought the politics of free trade to the consumer's breakfast table. Moving with ease from the comforts of home to the corridors of Congress, Hunt went on the condemn Whig efforts to place a tariff on West Indian sugar to protect sugar production in Louisiana. Using powerful language he called it unjust and oppressive because it imposed "a tax on all the pursuits of industry – that is, on all the consumers of sugar within the United States – for the purpose of favoring a particular branch of production, which we think government has no right to do."¹⁰⁴ Thus Hunt placed the consumer, and their rights, at the center of a free trade argument.

The passage of a new tariff in 1842 breached the 20 per cent ceiling on duties that had been established by the Compromise of 1833, raising duties on imported items and causing fresh frustration for free traders.¹⁰⁵ Nor were these raises insignificant. Imported printed cotton cloth, for example, could not be had in the U.S. for under 30 cents a yard, even though Britain was selling it to American wholesalers at 13 cents a yard. The combined effects of an ad valorem charge and a minimum valuation effectively put the tariff at nearly 60 percent.¹⁰⁶ Free traders continued to object – although their political support in the North was limited. Pennsylvania, with its mining and steel industries, continued to clamor for protection. New York was less unified. Democrats in New York had some sympathy for free trade, although some working men and small farmers often demanded that free soil should come before free trade.¹⁰⁷ In their efforts to persuade the

¹⁰⁴ "Art II – Free Trade," *The Merchants Magazine and Commercial Review*, 4 (March 1, 1841): 227.

¹⁰⁵ Walker-Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 593.

¹⁰⁶ Douglas A. Irwin and Peter Temin, "The Antebellum Tariff on Cotton Textiles Revisited" *The Journal of Economic History* 61 (Sept. 2001): 779-780.

¹⁰⁷ See for example "Free Trade and Free Labor," *Workingman's Advocate* 1 (Apr. 20, 1844); "Young America!" *Young America* 2 (Aug. 30, 1845); "When Rogues Fall Out, Honest Men Get Their Way" *Young America* 2 (March 7, 1846).

public that free trade was better for America, these authors continued to place the consumer at the heart of their argument.

The free-traders' efforts to make the connection between free trade and consumer advantage were so successful that even the opposition were forced to deal with the assertion, although they often struggled to refute the connection. In a piece on tariffs written in 1844, protectionists attempted to dispel the myth that free trade ensured low prices for consumers. "In 1841," they wrote, "the duty levied upon cotton goods, under the then existing *revenue law* was nominally 20 percent. The tariff of 1842, as is alleged by the "free trade" Loco Focos, increased that *revenue* duty to a highly *protective* one of 160 per cent. In January 1841, a piece of 4-4 shirting of 32 yards in quantity, cost on average \$3.12. In January 1844, under the "black Whig tariff" the like goods in quantity and quality sold for \$2.40; a difference in favor of the consumer under the "black tariff" or "160 percent. oppression" of 72 cents or 30 percent."¹⁰⁸ But this kind of reasoning did not seem to erode the supposition that free trade was the political economy that favored the interest of the American consumer. As an article in the *Boston Cultivator* put it in 1841 "[Free trade] sounds well in the public ear and a general system of free trade would be a capital affair if we could persuade the nations of the earth to adopt it. *We, the people, the consumers*, might then purchase where goods should be found cheapest and the products of the whole earth would be offered to us."¹⁰⁹ Echoing the constitutional preamble was no coincidence. By the 1840s, middle-class Americans had begun to

¹⁰⁸ "Fact vs. Theory" *Hudson River Chronicle* (Sing-Sing, NY) Oct. 15, 1844. "Loco Foco" was a name used by opponents to describe the workingmen's factions of the Democratic Party in New York. The group however appropriated the term and used it to describe themselves with pride. They should not be confused with the Working Men's Parties, who supported trade unionism. See Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 235 and Walker-Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 546.

¹⁰⁹ "Free Trade" *Boston Cultivator* Jul. 10 1841. [My emphasis].

imagine that cheap consumer goods, no matter where they were from, were something to which they were entitled as American citizens.

This sense of entitlement expanded into a newfound respect for American citizens' tastes and purchases. For example, *The United States Economist*, a trade publication addressing itself to any and all involved in the dry goods business, published articles in 1852 that referred to "the tastes and wants of the American people" as something to be studied. Urging their readers to keep a "watchful eye on young America" the editor, Thomas Kettle, promised that those who did would soon become "the occupants of palaces built with moneys gained through their intimate acquaintance with American tastes."¹¹⁰ This respect for American tastes was combined with a firm belief that consumers could not be forced into purchasing protected items, even if pro-tariff politicians urged consumers to do so as part of their duty. Pulling apart Horace Greeley's proposal to institute a tariff of 40% on imported silks, Kettle pointed to what he believed to be the fatal flaw in this plan. "We can make silk dear enough - *on paper* - to remunerate the grower; BUT WE CANNOT MAKE PEOPLE BUY DEAR SILKS."¹¹¹ Kettle's critique went to the very heart of the problem, the desires and decisions of American shoppers themselves. The consumer, Kettle pointed out, could not be dictated to. Nor should they be unfairly taxed by protection. Continuing with his analysis of the proposed silk tariff, Kettle argued that with all the duties imposed on raw silk, dyes and drugs used in making silk, there would be in the end "a tax upon CONSUMERS of 12 cents per yard."¹¹² The implication was that tariffs designed to protect industry placed an

¹¹⁰ "Foreign Dry Goods" *The United States Economist* 1 (May 1, 1852).

¹¹¹ "Why Change the Tariff" *The United States Economist* 1 (May 15, 1852).

¹¹² *Ibid.*

unfair obligation on a consumer who lived in a democracy whose unique quality, as Charles Lester had pointed out, was the democratic access to cheaper luxury goods. By 1846 the tide had turned in favor of free trade. The Walker Tariff, passed in 1846 applied a simple 25 percent ad valorem tariff, effectively dropping duties from 57 to 25 percent. Between 1846 and 1860, U.S. government eliminated protective tariffs, and watched in satisfaction as the American economy largely prospered.¹¹³ For free traders, this prosperity seemed to be the natural result of their economic policy.

By the 1840s and 50s a new understanding of the American consumer had taken shape. Pieced together by retailers and advertisers, credit agencies and merchants, free trade politicians and their opponents, the consumer they created was powerful and to be respected. As a community, these consumers were white middle-class, domesticated Americans, a broad swath of citizens that represented a specific vision of American democracy as well as America's unswerving progress towards sophistication and civilization. As consumers, their tastes were to be catered to, an approach that dismissed the efforts of organizations like the Franklin Institute's School of Design which imagined training Americans to consume differently. Ultimately this consumer had the right to demand that nothing, and especially not their government, obstruct their right to obtain goods at the lowest price. It was a radically different figure from the one which had predominated in the 1810s and it was a vision which only became more firmly entrenched as America enjoyed fifteen years of prosperity between 1846 and 1861.

¹¹³ Irwin and Temin, "Antebellum Tariff," 780. The U.S. policy reflected a broader international move toward free trade, including, most importantly the British abolition of the Corn Laws. See Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital, 1848-1875* (1975 reprint, New York; Vintage, 1996), 35-38.

Yet, as a visible and influential figure in American political and cultural discourse, it should hardly be surprising that when that prosperity was threatened, the figure of the consumer quickly came under attack. The Panic of 1857 caused a hasty resurfacing of far older ideas about the impossibility of including luxury in a republic. Yet with this old anxiety came a new critique, one that focused on the dangerous effects of the new American consumer's relentless drive for cheap goods. Even less surprising was the fact that the target of these attacks was the female consumer. The virtuous female consumer, who had during the good times been seen to domesticate the public spaces of the city with her genteel shopping practices, quickly degenerated into a dry goods vulture, who picked over the pieces of the commercial crisis with unpleasant glee.¹¹⁴ As the Panic took hold, journalists and satirists were quick to point out that female shoppers were rushing to Broadway, desperate to make the most of retailers' efforts to sell off their stock quickly and for cash. As the great shopping precinct became plastered with signs that announced "Great Sacrifice" the female shoppers were depicted as part of an unattractive commercial frenzy, or what one author called a "shopping mania," a horde of shoppers unable to restrain their impulse to go after the cheapest goods possible.¹¹⁵ Described as a "spending animal – a creature whose destiny is to buy, whose heart is "a bargain" whose soul is an "immense reduction" [and] whose very existence is "an alarming sacrifice" these women epitomized the very worst of what the newly powerful American consumer could be.¹¹⁶ Their shallow pursuit of sartorial splendor obliterated all their "republican virtues" and the ability to obtain new goods, that for Lester had represented the very best of American democracy, had become nothing more than an

¹¹⁴ "Dry Goods at a Discount" *Harper's Weekly* Oct. 24, 1857.

¹¹⁵ "An Afternoon Among the Dry Goods" *Harper's Weekly* Oct. 31, 1857.

¹¹⁶ "Dry Goods at a Discount" *Harper's Weekly* Oct. 24, 1857.

undignified mob scene, where domestic gentility had degenerated into a swirling mob scene.¹¹⁷ [Fig.5. 12] These caricatured consumers symbolized an uncomfortable truth that Americans were beginning to sense about the free market: that it was incompatible with the order and security that middle-class Americans craved for their nation.¹¹⁸

This specter of disorder, coupled with the need to prove their cultural superiority on a world stage, made consumption a particular object of scrutiny by mid-century. Even before the onslaught of the Panic, journalists urged women in particular to set a good example to all. “That the rich should spend their wealth is naturally to be expected,” opined one writer. “[B]ut it would be well if it were spent in such a way as not to vulgarize the tastes and demoralize the character of their fellow-citizens.”¹¹⁹ While no free trader, or retailer or advertiser for that matter, was prepared to curtail the consumer’s enthusiasms, there was a tacit understanding embedded in their critiques that for the republic to remain stable, free from the convulsions of Panics and other economic disasters, the consumer must learn to shop judiciously, according to their station in society. If government was to have no role in regulating and restraining the kinds of goods that a consumer might buy, then the consumer’s obligation, became accordingly more important.¹²⁰ As urban Americans in the north came to understand themselves as part of a republic of powerful consumers, who were entitled to a share of the luxuries and comfort the nation had to offer, they also understood that their consumption was a personal civic obligation. But these oppressive obligations only resurfaced at times of

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Beckert notes this in the context of labor and production but not consumption, see Beckert, *Monied Metropolis*, 71.

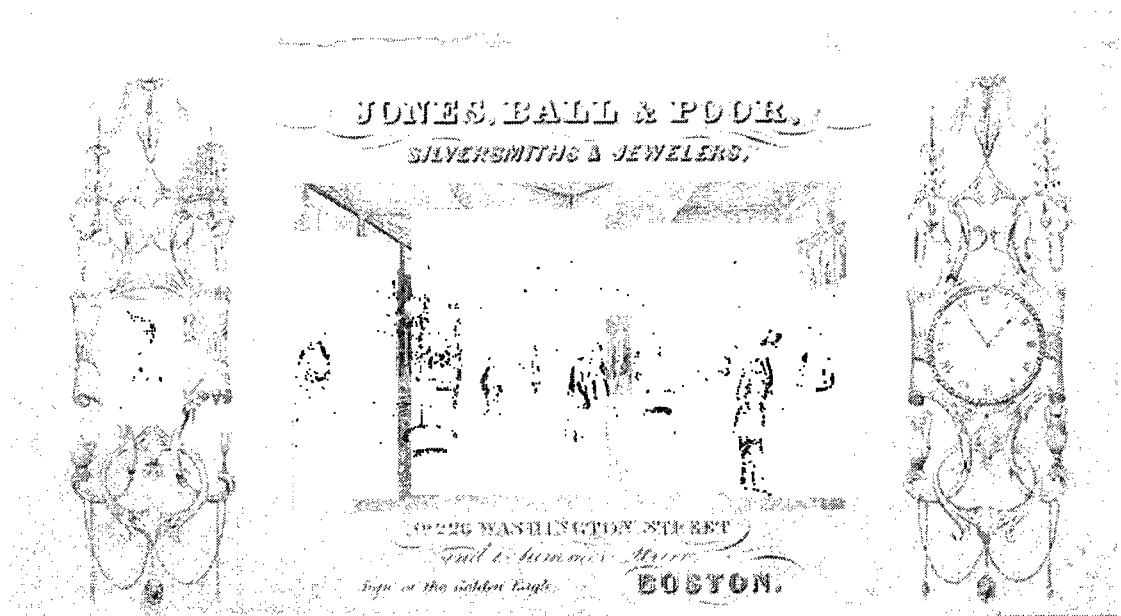
¹¹⁹ “Dear Woman” *Harper’s Weekly* Jan. 3, 1857.

¹²⁰ See for example John Fanning Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania in the Olden Time* vol. 1 (Philadelphia, Leary, Stuart & Co, 1909) 253. It is important to note that Watson was writing this text in 1842.

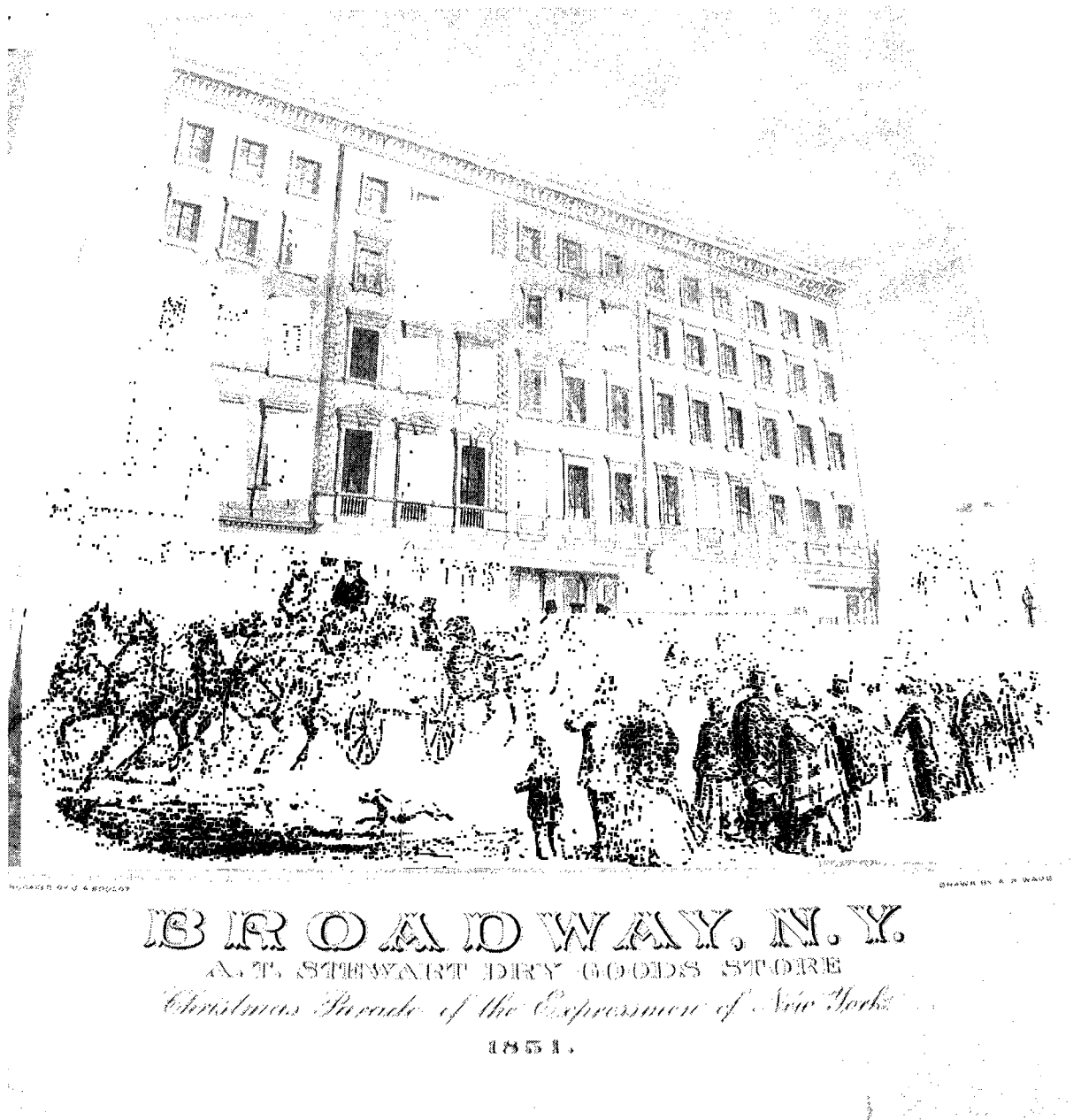
national commercial stress. At those moments, Americans could point the finger at the citizens who had made poor consumer choices, and blame their lack of responsibility for financial disaster. But when economic prosperity reigned, then Americans could congratulate themselves on their commercial republic and enjoy the inheritance of luxury that was rightfully theirs as citizens of the new American capitalist democracy.



(Fig. 5.1) J.W. Orr, *Proposed Plan for a Free Bridge Across Broadway, to be erected by J.N Genin at his own expense*, (New York: s.n., [1850?]) Geographic PR 020 Collection, Print Department. Courtesy of the New-York Historical Society.



(Fig. 5.2) Jones, Ball and Poor, *Jones, Ball & Poor, silversmiths and jewelers. No. 226 Washington Street...Boston* (Boston: s.n, between 1851 and 1860), Box 'Early Trade Cards A-Lawrence,' Early Trade Card Collection. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.



(Fig. 5.3) "Broadway, N.Y. A.T. Stewart Dry Goods Store" (New York: Engraved by J.A. Bogert, Drawn by A.R. Waud, 1851) Geographic PR Collection, Print Department. Courtesy of the New-York Historical Society.



(Fig. 5 4) "Before and After the Panic" *Harper's Weekly*, November 14, 1857.

Caption Reads:

Before The Panic: Little Girl to Dry Goods Merchant – 'Please Sir, may I-----'
Merchant – 'No, no: go away, go away there little girl! You oughtn't to come in here.'

After The Panic: Same Merchant to Same Little Girl: 'Three Cents worth of Thread?
Yes my little Dear, directly. Any thing more? And how's your mamma?'

NEW GOODS!

**JAMES GORDON & SON,
PEORIA, N. Y.**

We have just returned from New York with a new stock of

DRY GOODS,

GROCERIES,

Glass Ware, Crockery, Boots and Shoes,

PAINTS, OILS, DRUGS, &C.

These goods have all been bought cheap, and will be sold cheap.

Good Prints for 1s. per Yard,

And other goods correspondingly low. We invite all our friends and customers to call and see us. We can make it to your interest to do so. We are confident we can please.

**JAMES GORDON,
WILLIAM GORDON.**

PEORIA, N. Y., May 1, 1867.

(Fig. 5.5) James Gordon and Son, *New Goods!*: James Gordon and Son, Peoria N.Y (Peoria N.Y: s.n., 1867). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

Note the address: "all our friends and customers."

ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND LBS. PRIME NEW ORLEANS

SUGAR!!!

Just received at Kibbee's Emporium, and for sale at

Five to 5½ Cents per Pound!

I now announce to the citizens of the Western Reserve, that my Spring Stock of Dry Goods, Groceries, Crockery, Yankee Notions, &c., has arrived, and will be sold at the following rates:

100,000 LBS. PRIME N. O. SUGAR AT 5 TO 5½ CTS. PER LB.

100 BAGS BEST RIO COFFEE at 12½ CTS. PER LB.

25 Hhds. MOLASSES 25 to 37½ cts. per Gal.

40,000 yds. PRINTS at 6 to 10 cts. per yd.

60,000 yds. "STARK MILLS" sheetings, 8 cts. per yd.

100 Chests TEA, 40 to 50 cts. per lb.!

&c., &c. The above are only the prices of a few articles, but customers who pay us a visit, will find all other goods reduced in the same proportion!

The Ready Pay System!

Lately adopted at the "Emporium," works to a charm, and crowds our large sales-rooms with customers from morning till night.

STILL THERE IS ROOM!

And enough goods for all, each and every one, at the above low rates, at No. 3, River Block, Main st., Warren, Ohio.

J. H. KIBBEE.

Warren, April 6, 1854.

(Fig. 5.6) J.H Kibbee, *One Hundred Thousand lbs Prime New Orleans Sugar* (Warren, Ohio: s.n. 1854). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

Note the address: "Citizens of the Western Reserve."

Fig. 7 (a)

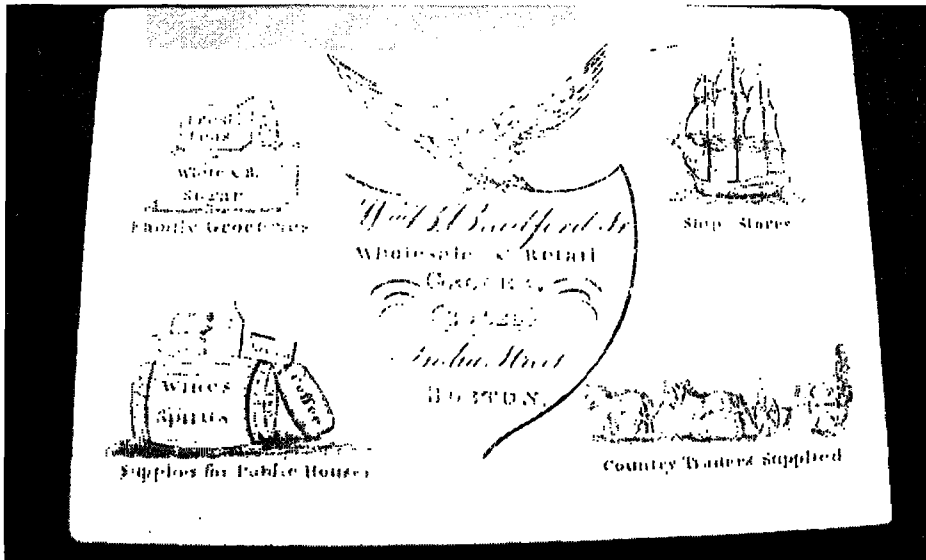
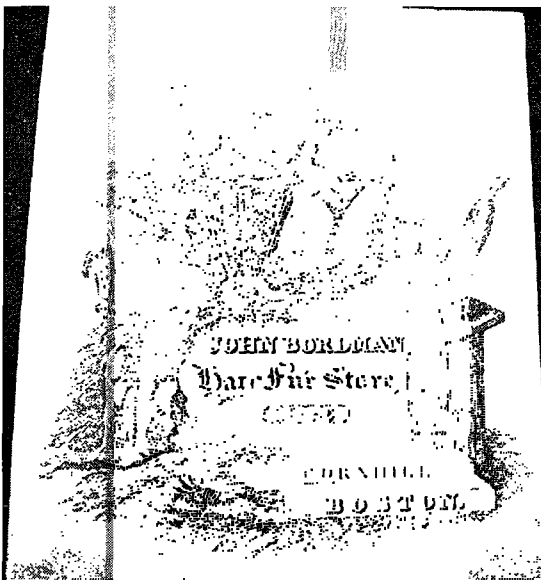


Fig. 7 (b)



(Fig. 5.7) Examples of two trade cards.

a) William B Bradford, *Wm. B. Bradford Jr. wholesale & retail grocer, 23 & 24 India Street Boston* (Boston: s.n, 1810 and 1820).

b) John Bordman, *John Bordman hat & fur store no. 56 Cornhill Boston* (Boston: s.n, 1820 or 1821).

Both found in Box 'Early Trade Cards A-Lawrence,' Early Trade Card Collection. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

**MACULLAR, WILLIAMS
&
PARKER.**

MANUFACTURERS OF

FINE CLOTHING

TO ORDER

AND FOR THE

WHOLESALE-RETAIL

TRADE

194 WASHINGTON STREET

BOSTON



**MACULLAR, WILLIAMS
&
PARKER.**

IMPORTERS & JOBBERS OF

FINE WOOLENS

AND

TAILORS TRIMMINGS

194 WASHINGTON ST.

AND

67 HAWLEY ST

BOSTON

MACULLAR, WILLIAMS & PARKER

WHOLESALE AND RETAIL DEALERS IN

FINE CLOTHING AND MENS FURNISHING GOODS

AND IMPORTERS AND JOBBERS OF

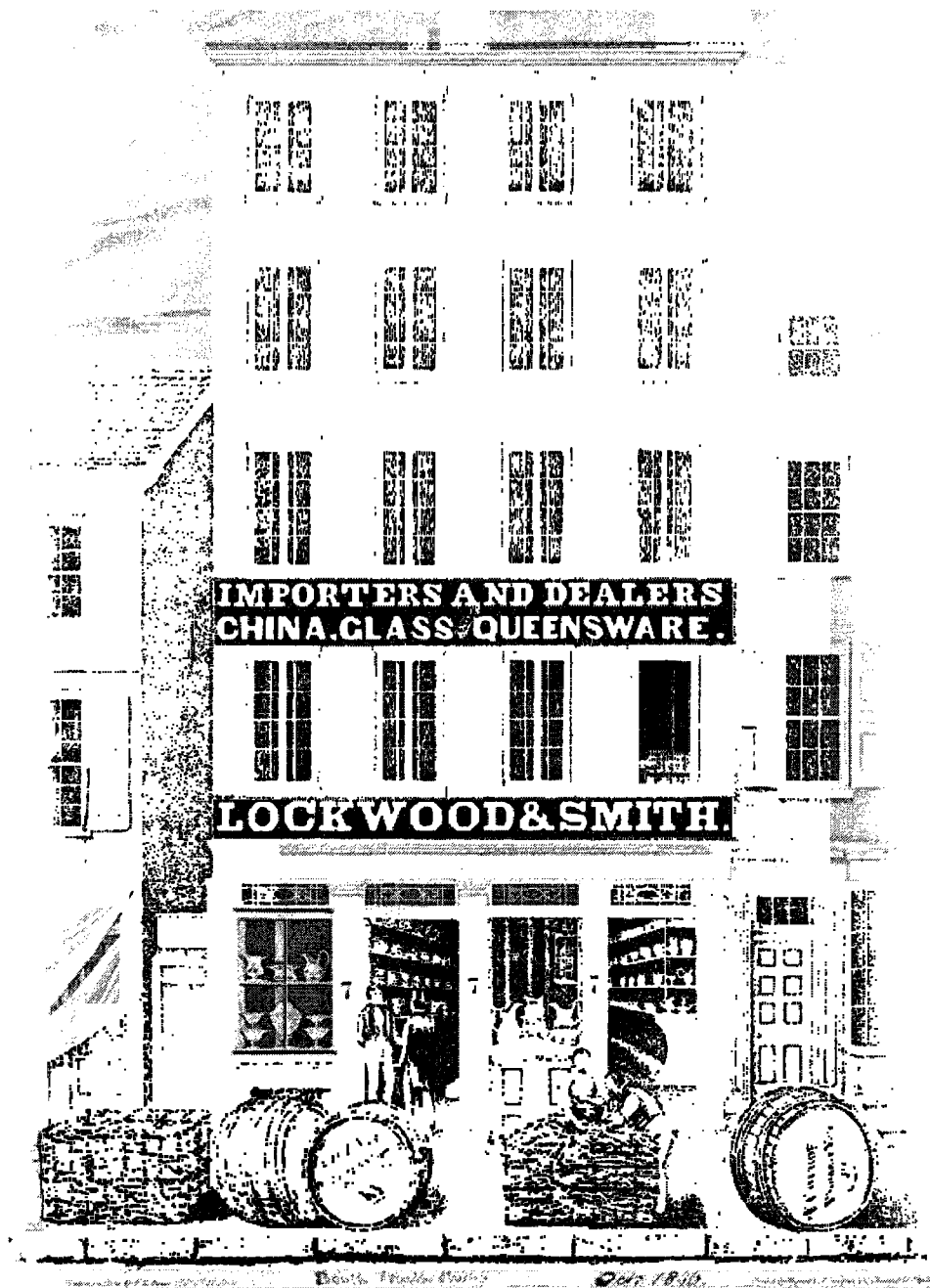
FINE WOOLENS AND TAILORS TRIMMINGS

194 WASHINGTON STREET BOSTON

(Fig. 5.8) J.H Bufford & Sons, *Macullar, Williams & Parker* wholesale and retail dealers in fine clothing and mens furnishing goods and importers and jobbers of fine woollens and tailors trimmings 194 Washington Street, Boston. ([Boston]: J.H Bufford & Sons, lith. Boston, Mass., between 1864 and 1866). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.



(Fig. 5.9) Edward Williams, Clay, *Life in Philadelphia*: 'What do you tink of my new poke bonnet...?' (Philadelphia: S. Hart, c.1830). Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.



(Fig. 5.10) W.H Rease, *Lockwood and Smith, importers and dealers in china, glass and Queensware*, (Philadelphia: Wagner & McGuigan, ca. 1846). Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.



(Fig. 5.12) "The Dry Goods Epidemic, Broadway at Three P.M." *Harper's Weekly*, October 31, 1857.

Chapter Six

“In the Field with a Terrible Array of Dry Goods.” Consumption and the Union’s Fight for the Nation, 1850-1865.

In April 1861, with the firing of the first shots on Fort Sumter, the Confederates declared war on the Union and its vision of a commercial republic. In an attempt to prepare the citizens of the South for what was to come, the editors of *DeBows Review*, the leading pro-slavery magazine, published a stern warning to its secessionist readers. “We have brave men enough to conduct war. We need only money. By cheap living, we can save money enough to defray the expenditure of war, however long...The soldier is ready to sacrifice his life for his country; can’t the civilian sacrifice a dinner, remit a glass of wine, give up his broadcloth and carriage?”¹ The message, along with the anxiety, was clear. For the Confederacy to have a hope of winning the war against the North, Southern citizens would have to restrain their consumption for the sake of nation.

¹ “Art. II.—Wealth and Poverty—Luxury and Economy,” *DeBow’s Review* 5 (Apr. 1861), 399.

In contrast, the men and women of the Union, seemed to fear no such restrictions. New York merchants had been understandably fearful in the months before the war, anxious that a conflict would destroy the valuable business they did with Southern cotton magnates. But with the outbreak of hostilities, New York city witnessed a frenzy of consumption. In July 1861, the New York *Tribune* reported, “We hear about ‘war’ prices...Dry goods at marvelous prices. Clothing at next to no price.”² Shoppers apparently heard as well and did not hold back. Instead, they rushed to take advantage of the low prices that came as a result of retailers trying to get rid of their overstock. Nor was this rush confined to the precincts of Broadway. Across the northeast, advertisements appeared that conflated consumption with a strike against the Confederacy. In Enon, Pennsylvania, less than a month after the shots on Sumter were fired, local merchant Benjamin Ramage put up a broadside that conscripted shoppers to the Union cause. “Attention Volunteers!” proclaimed his poster, “Fort Sumter Re-taken...Ramage’s Store Reinforced by a Splendid Stock of New Goods...sold at War Prices.”³ Using his merchandise to stand in for munitions, this small town merchant capitalized on the moment of war and used the attack on Fort Sumter as a way to tempt shoppers to sample his wares. Commercial rhetoric notwithstanding, the opportunistic broadside and the rush to Broadway suggest that citizens in the North did not let war dampen their enthusiasm for shopping, a fact that stood in stark contrast to the Confederate fears’ of consumption.

Taking this contrast as its starting point, this chapter argues that by 1861 Union shoppers did not find it hard to believe that their consumption was an intrinsically Northern act, one that reinforced the strength of their beleaguered nation in a number of

² New York *Tribune*, July 15, 1861, quoted in Edward K. Spann, *Gotham At War. New York City, 1861-1865* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 2002), 135.

³ Benjamin Ramage, “Attention Volunteers!” (Philadelphia: Duross Brothers, 1861).

ways. The chapter begins by examining how this understanding originated in the sectional tensions that developed over the course of the 1850s. Drawing inspiration from a variety of newspaper reports and literary accounts, the wealthy citizens of New York and Philadelphia began to believe that the ability to buy the accoutrement of domestic gentility was a direct benefit of living in a free soil economy. While they were not naïve enough to imagine that every citizen in the North could afford these luxuries, they at least believed that the working classes could realistically aspire to purchasing these items in a free soil economy. It was an aspiration that they thought was an impossibility in the South. Through this lens, the urban elite began to see the ownership of domestic finery as a symbol of what it meant to live in the Union. As sectional antipathy gained more force, they came to believe that this material reflection of their refinement signaled the superiority of the North's political economy.

This belief soon spread beyond the confines of the elite neighborhoods of New York and Philadelphia. Small-town retailers across the northeast harnessed the idea that citizens could expect to share in this refined culture of consumption and used it to sell clothing, boots, shoes, bonnets, cutlery, china, linens and all manner of household items. In selling this merchandise to their customers, the retailers invoked the claim that as citizens their customers were entitled to certain considerations, including the same kind of access to the marketplace that wealthy urban consumers enjoyed. Yoking a republican ethos to their advertising rhetoric, rural retailers experimented with a vision of a specifically American marketplace, defining access to fine goods as a civic entitlement. In 1861, the crucible of war transformed these ideas into beliefs about what individuals could expect as citizens of the Union. Reacting swiftly, retailers and advertisers took

advantage of the flood of patriotism that washed over the North and channeled it to serve their own ends. In doing so they helped, for a short moment at the start of the war, to define consumption as the act of a virtuous citizen.

Northern citizens assigning new cultural significance to consumption over the course of the 1850s, could not have anticipated the ways in which the imperatives of funding the war against the Confederates would add another level of meaning to the act of shopping in the 1860s. The second part of this chapter examines the Republican decision to implement a new tariff to help fund the war, a decision which also contributed to the idea that a citizen's consumption was a civic obligation. The legislation, which was aimed primarily at protecting northern manufacturing interests, placed heavy duties on most imported items, a list which ran the gamut from perishable items to highly finished consumer goods. With these tariffs in place, the purchase of any consumer good on the list became in part a contribution to the coffers of the Federal government. The onus this placed on the consumer was eventually framed by politicians as a civic obligation, a tax paid by consumers who undertook the burden as part of their civic duty. Yet at the same time, the tariff helped to re-fashion unrestrained consumption as a civic virtue. The contrast this legislation made with the free trade policy and eventual sumptuary restrictions adopted by the Confederates only helped to reinforce the idea that consumption in the North had a uniquely civic quality.

Of course, the Union impulse to shop was neither entirely carefree nor did it come without complications. Wealthy consumers soon discovered themselves to be walking a fine yet familiar line, between penny pinching and excess, as old anxieties were exacerbated by wartime pressures. Although the North did not suffer from the terrible

scarcities that plagued the South, only a small section of the Union's population experienced the war as a time of abundance. For the working classes, who had been poor at the war's start, the conflict simply exacerbated their poverty. Soaring prices, the loss of male breadwinners and eventually the enforcement of the draft, forced many to struggle as they had not struggled during peacetime, sometimes, as with the New York Draft Riots, with explosive consequences.⁴ Yet for those in the North who did not live in poverty, the war brought personal heartache but not dire economic hardships. For some astute businessmen, the war even created opportunity.⁵ The final part of this chapter investigates the public tension over the place of excessive consumption in a war time economy. While few voices condoned material self-indulgence while men were dying on the battlefield, Union newspapers and magazines struggled to condemn the spenders outright. Having paid taxes and thus funded the Union cause, critics found it hard to justify why the rich should limit their liberty to spend.

Faced with this uncomfortable truth, most men and women in the North focused on a different kind of consumption, one that allowed them to unequivocally trumpet their devotion to the Union's cause. The growing trade in patriotic stationery packages, lithographs and other images for presentation and even patriotic clothing became one way for Union citizens, especially women, to pledge their allegiance in the fight against the

⁴ Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York to 1898* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 883-905. See also Iver Bernstein, *The New York City Draft Riots: Their Significance in American Society and Politics in the Age of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁵ For an overview of the economic lives of northern citizens that stresses continuity see J. Matthew Gallman, *The North Fights the Civil War: The Home Front* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1994), 92-108. For the account that stresses more the great change that the war brought to people's lives see Philip Shaw Paludan, *A People's Contest: The Union and Civil War 1861-1865* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988). On Philadelphia see J. Matthew Gallman, *Mastering Wartime: A Social History of Philadelphia During the Civil War* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990). On New York see Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 864-882; Spann, *Gotham at War*, 45-55, 135-154; Ernest A. McKay, *The Civil War and New York City* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 95-103.

Confederacy. In buying this commodified patriotism, northern citizens used consumption to assert their civic pride and declare themselves as loyal to the Union in communities torn apart by war. But for all the blatant nationalism of these goods, their packaging disguised the fact that these goods were simply displays of civic sentiment. Their purchase did not directly fund the war, nor could their production and exchange be construed as bolstering a specific part of the Union's economy. In the end, the purchase of these goods signaled a shift, one that moved the buyer from the concerns of a republican political economy to the imperatives of a Union politics of representation, releasing the citizen-consumer in the era of Lincoln from the restrictions and restraints that had defined American consumption since the age of Jefferson.

Scholars have tended to overlook the contours and implications of everyday wartime consumption, an unsurprising oversight given the absence of the topic of consumption in antebellum scholarship more generally. The little that is said usually focuses on the inflated prices of essentials such as food and fuel. Instead, discussions of economic activity on the Union homefront have tended to focus on two separate although interrelated subjects, both of which tend to bypass the question of consumption. The first is the way in which military procurement altered local economies and either boosted or retarded industrial growth. This work, responding to older historiographical questions about the role of the war in shaping America's capitalist development, has revealed a great deal about how the Union mobilized for the battlefield. But the focus on labor and capital has tilted our gaze towards the progress of production and failed to incorporate consumption into this discussion of the Union's war.⁶ The second subject is the effect of

⁶ The argument that the Civil War did not cause industrialization in America is well established, see Walter Licht, *Industrializing America: The Nineteenth Century, American Moment* (Baltimore and London: Johns

the Union's economic policies on the growth of the state and the course of the war. Here, the rich literature on wartime bonds, the federal income tax, the introduction of "greenbacks" and the use of wartime loans have all probed the crucial interconnections between the financial needs of the state and the public's response in economic terms. But this same scholarship has failed to explore how these policies may have defined the ways in which Unionists tried to imagine their economic rights and responsibilities to the state as consumers during wartime.⁷

The place of consumption has also been overlooked by those scholars who have studied the many ways in which the Civil War mobilized national sentiment in the North. In part, this is because of the tendency to draw a dividing line between patriotism and

Hopkins University Press, 1995), 79-101 and Stanley L. Engerman and J. Matthew Gallman, "The Civil War Economy: A Modern View" in *On the Road to Total War: The American Civil War and the German Wars of Unification, 1861-1871* ed., Stig Förster and Jörg Nagler, (Washington D.C. and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 217-249. This argument stands, even when you take into account the Union wartime mobilization. See Mark R. Wilson, *The Business of Civil War Military Mobilization and the State* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

However, the ramifications of the war are less clear-cut. I would argue along with Sven Beckert, Eric Foner, and Amy Dru Stanley that the war marked the end of the large scale manufacturers' and merchants' respect for a producerist based liberalism and provided a new social class and ideological framework that enabled American capitalism to develop into the industrial capitalism of the twentieth century. Despite this, it is important to note that this change did not stop American workers from continuing to invest significance in their production and construct their identity around their labor. See Sven Beckert, *Monied Metropolis: New York and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001); Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) and Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁷ Richard Bensell, *Yankee Leviathan: The Origins of Central State Authority in America, 1859-1877* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990). On the implementation of new federal economic policy see Frank William Taussig, *The Tariff History of the United States* (New York and London: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1923), 155-170; Bensell, *Yankee Leviathan*, 146-173; on the income tax see Robert Stanley, *Dimensions of Law in the Service of Order: Origins of the Federal Income Tax, 1861-1913* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 25-33; and Joseph A. Hill, "The Civil War Income Tax," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 8 (Jul. 1894): 416-452. On the ways in which rich private citizens helped to finance the war see Beckert, *Monied Metropolis*, 111-144. On the establishment of legal tender and for the best treatment of how this may have effected citizens in a more routine way see Stephen Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 305-359. There is more of a focus on consumption in the literature on the Civil War South, where blockade running and dire shortages politicized consumption in more obvious ways. See Mark Thornton and Robert B. Ekelund, Jr., *Tariffs, Blockades and Inflation: The Economics of Civil War* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 2004), 29-58.

commerce. As a result the scholarship on civilian responses to the war focuses on Union philanthropy and volunteerism, seeing this as the obvious outlet for patriotic sentiment. Thus, historians have cast subjects like the United States Sanitary Commission as solely charitable concerns, when in truth these organizations drew upon commercial resources and asked people to respond to their fundraising fairs as consuming citizens. But well beyond the charitable efforts of Union citizens lies a commercial response to the war that is less well known. Taking a long view of this process, this chapter starts in 1850 and explores the ways in which retailers and consumers responded to growing sectional tensions and finally the outbreak of hostilities. The final chapter of this project reveals that the circumstances of war enabled ordinary citizens to fuse their personal consumption to the larger project of sustaining their nation as it came under attack; a process which simultaneously gave consumption new symbolic significance and freed citizens from the restraints that came from being consumers in a republican political economy.⁸

As political tensions over slavery gained momentum during the course of the 1850s, the promise that certain consumer goods could help Americans attain middle-class respectability took on a new sectional significance.⁹ Guided by newspaper reports and literary accounts of the South, that described the material poverty experienced by the majority of white families in the plantation economy, the reading public in the North

⁸ The two best books I have read on this subject are Jeannie Attie, *Patriotic Toil: Northern Women and the American Civil War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998) and Melinda Lawson, *Patriot Fires: Forging a New American Nationalism in the Civil War North* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002).

⁹ The milestones on this tense path to war included the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 and the consequent fiasco that was the settlement of Kansas, known popularly as “Bleeding Kansas.” For an excellent review of these years see James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 47-170.

began to see the domestic goods that furnished their everyday lives as a symbol of the superiority of the North's free labor political economy. Readers of popular abolitionist fiction and travel narratives in particular, learnt that Southern society had no middle-class. Instead, they read about a slaveholding aristocracy, whose possessions (which included their slaves) indicated their corruption; and about an impoverished southern farming class, whose lack of possessions signaled their uncouth ignorance.¹⁰ In these accounts, the inability of white working southerners to possess consumer goods such as carpets, cookware and curtains, became a testament to the failures of the plantation economy to create a civilized society and respectable citizens.

This literary dynamic was best captured by the British and northern bourgeois travel writers who were both fascinated and repulsed by the South. These middle-class eyes sent back descriptions to a northern public of the South as a region both exotic and corrupt, where slavery created a class of sensual and depraved aristocrats who tyrannized their swarms of slaves and lorded it over the independent yeoman farmers, struggling to exist on the edges of a political economy of oppression.¹¹ Frederick Law Olmsted, a Connecticut-born son of a prosperous merchant, was one such travel writer. Starting in 1850, Olmsted travelled back and forth across the South for over ten years, publishing in that time fifty pieces on southern slave society in the *New York Times* and the *New York*

¹⁰ Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 38-43. See also Susan Mary Grant, *North Over South: Northern Nationalism and American Identity in the Antebellum Era* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2000).

¹¹ McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*. 40. McCurry argues that this dynamic of seeing is best compared to the discourse of orientalism as used by Edward Said, where the discursive dichotomies of occident and orient divided the observers from the observed. See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978) and Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

Tribune.¹² In 1856 and 1857 Olmsted consolidated his observations into two book length works, which by November of 1861 he revised again into one comprehensive account of the South and the people who lived there. He called this work *The Cotton Kingdom*.

In *The Cotton Kingdom* Olmsted provided readers with a complete assessment of all parts of the slave holding South. He took his readers on a journey from Virginia through to East Texas and back again. He revealed to his northern readers the coastal lowlands with their rich and showy plantations, the piney backwoods and scrubby uplands of the Carolinas, the rough urban landscape of Mobile, Alabama and finally the hard-scrabble lifestyle of poor whites living along the Mississippi River. In all these places, Olmsted commented on the material poverty that characterized the lives of the white men and women who cobbled a living together beyond the borders of the large cotton and sugar plantations that dominated the South's economic and cultural landscape. Arriving at a home in central Mississippi in June 1854, Olmsted described what he called a favorable representation of "the condition of poor whites of the plantation district."¹³ These were families who were rich enough to own a horse and wagon as well as land on which to plant cotton but not wealthy enough to hire out a slave. This family, Olmsted wrote, lived "in a single room, twenty-eight by twenty-five feet in area and open to the room above. There was a large fireplace at one end and a door on each side – no windows at all. Two bedsteads, a spinning-wheel, a packing case, which served as a bureau, a cupboard made of rough hewn slabs, two or three deer-skin seated chairs, a Connecticut clock and a large poster of Jayne's patent medicines, constituted all the visible furniture,

¹² Arthur M. Schlesinger, "Introduction" in Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveler's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States*, rev. ed. (1861; repr., New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), xxi–xxvii. See also Laura Wood Roper, "Frederick Law Olmsted in the 'Literary Republic,'" *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 39 (Dec. 1952): 459-482.

¹³ Olmsted, *Cotton Kingdom*, 376.

either useful or ornamental in purpose.”¹⁴ Olmsted’s description was intended to emphasize the bleak lack of comfort and respectability that defined the lives of these people. The furniture was basic and unlovely. Nor was there any separation of private and public space, a separation that was key to establishing respectable gentility in the North.

The only item in the room that was not roughly assembled or home-made was the clock. Olmsted’s decision to label it as a Connecticut clock was significant on several levels. Primarily, the designation alluded to a specific type of clock. Connecticut clock makers, like Chauncey Jerome, had recently learnt how to produce clocks at an unprecedented rate, mechanizing production in order to turn out vast quantities of virtually identical one day shelf-clocks. By 1850, Jerome owned two factories, one in New Haven and the other in Derby, Connecticut, which turned out 130,000 and 150,000 clocks respectively. Jerome, who boasted that by 1860 he had sold “millions” of his clocks both in America and Europe, charged only \$1.50 for these clocks – a small price for an item that had once been too expensive for most families to afford.¹⁵ Thus Olmsted could simply have used the adjective to signal that the clock was one of these mass produced timepieces. However, the clock was also one of only two items in the household that were not utterly utilitarian. In a household that lived by an agrarian seasonal rhythm, the clock, like the poster, was in some ways ornamental. Apparently Olmsted saw it as such. He tacked the clock on at the end, assigning it the same status as the poster on the wall. Perhaps Olmsted, himself a son of Connecticut, wished to note that the only item that spoke to a more comfortable level of living came from his home state, up North.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ David A. Hounshell, *From the American System to Mass Production, 1800-1932*, 2nd ed., (1984; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 58-61.

As a set of symbols, the constellation of basic wooden furniture items, the paucity of civilized consumer goods and the shabby farm setting all signaled a concomitant lack of standards in both social and moral behavior. The woman of the house was “sulky” and spat at the fire. She undressed in front of Olmsted, crawling into a nest of quilts on the floor which she shared with the rest of her family. Neither the wife, nor her husband or children fully undressed to go to sleep, nor did they wash, both rituals that a northern middle-class family would have observed. The poor personal habits, the lack of concern for privacy and in particular the woman’s lack of domesticity all signaled the low standards of behavior that abounded in this household according to middle-class standards as defined by northern magazines, advice manuals and cultural conventions of sociability.¹⁶ The lack of politesse could have been predicted by northern readers upon reading the description of the domestic interior. Antebellum northern readers were used to reading material surroundings as a metonym for morality and civility.¹⁷

Olmsted’s continuous descriptions of the poor white southerners as people without carpets, lamps, books or glass windows were intended to signal to northern readers that the slave south was a society that lacked a respectable, industrious, well educated and independent middle-class. As Olmsted’s descriptions made clear, these bare

¹⁶ On northern middle-class habits and sensibilities with particular reference to domesticity see Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: ‘Woman’s Sphere’ in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catherine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New York: Norton, 1973).

¹⁷ This point has been well made by Daniel A. Cohen, “The Murder of Maria Bickford: Fashion, Passion, and the Birth of a Consumer Culture” *American Studies* 31 (Fall, 1990): 9 and Lori Merish, “‘The Hand of Refined Taste’ in the Frontier Landscape: Caroline Kirkland’s ‘A New Home, Who’ll Follow?’ and the Feminization of American Consumerism,” *American Quarterly* 45 (Dec. 1993): 485-523. See also Jean Christophe Agnew, “The Consuming Vision of Henry James” in *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980* ed., Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears, (New York: Pantheon Book, 1983), 68. It is worth noting however, that unlike the texts which Daniel Cohen cited that explored *only* the interiors, Olmsted who was considering the political economy of the south as a whole, was careful to include exteriors also.

houses gave way to a society that was rude in habits of body and mind. While Olmsted missed all his creature comforts, he was particularly disturbed by the lack of lamps. Since he was only ever provided with a smoky fire he found that he could never sit and read in the evenings.¹⁸ Lack of material culture could signal a lack of education and intellectual refinement. As he commented more than once, the homes were not furnished “nearly as well as the most common New England farm-house.”¹⁹ Indeed, any kind of material comfort that *was* to be found had come directly from the northern towns or cities. Aside from the Connecticut clock, Olmsted once recognized a Connecticut made rocking chair and pointed out that “a friend [had] informed [him] that [it was] cheaper to have all his furniture and clothing made for him in New York to order when he needed any...than to get it in Mobile.”²⁰ Olmsted’s writing worked to create an archetypal vision of both North and South, the first being both morally and materially superior to the second.

If Olmsted’s readers required any further persuasion that their material culture was indicative of moral superiority, they needed only to pick up the best-selling book of the decade, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In this fictional account of the horrors of slavery, author Harriet Beecher Stowe also used domestic furnishings to signal a level of morality and sentiment in her characters. Thus Stowe introduced the sympathetic character of Mrs. Bird, the wife of the Ohio Senator who shelters the escaped slave-mother Eliza as such:

The light of the cheerful fire shone on the rug and carpet of a cosey [sic] parlor, and glittered on the sides of the tea-cups and well-brightened tea-pot, as Senator Bird was drawing off his boots, preparatory to inserting his feet in a pair of new

¹⁸ Olmsted, *Cotton Kingdom*, 62, 141, 160-161, 281, 287, 366. On the lack of lamp light in particular see 146 and 313.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 366.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 220.

handsome slippers, which his wife had been working for him while away on his senatorial tour.²¹

The simple accoutrements of home were not flashy, but Mrs. Bird's possession of them allowed her to fulfill her wifely role by using them to care for her husband. Later in the story, Mrs. Bird used her possessions to comfort and aid the runaway slave who turns to the Birds in desperation. Providing Eliza with food, warmth, good clothing and domestic comfort certainly signaled Mrs. Bird's inherent moral rightness.

But the underlying truth of the interaction was that the goods themselves enabled Mrs. Bird to perform her moral duty. Without her clothing and teapots, Mrs. Bird could not have offered the help that Eliza and her son needed. Thus Stowe, like Olmsted, placed consumer goods into a moral universe and identified carpets, tea-cups and slippers as items that helped Northern citizens to do their Christian duty. However, Stowe was not as forgiving of Northern culture as Olmsted was. As a shrewd political commentator, Stowe allowed readers to observe that this Christian duty was, in 1850, not a civic duty, since to aid escaping slaves was to break the Fugitive Slave Law. In this way, Stowe used familiar consumer goods to simultaneously prove the possibilities of Northern moral superiority, while criticizing Congress for compromising with slavery and making a morally wrong act into a civic obligation.

Beyond the literary realm, similar attitudes towards consumer goods and Northern free soil political culture circulated through a very different medium. Beginning in the 1850s, dry goods store owners used the idea that Northern material culture reflected a superior political culture to tempt local customers to buy new merchandise. Echoing

²¹ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Life Among the Lowly*, rev. ed. (1852; London: Penguin Classics, 1986), 141. For further discussion of the sentimental aesthetics and consumer culture in Stowe's work see, Lori Merish, "Sentimental Consumption: Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Aesthetics of Middle-Class Ownership," *American Literary History*, 8 (Spring, 1996): 1-33.

Olmsted's observations, these advertisements connected the purchase of dry goods to a vision of civic standing and economic equality that in specific ways reflected a broader vision of free soil political economy and American democracy. However, the advertisements reflected the fact that these connections were not as simple as Olmsted had made out. If the travel writer spoke to a reading audience that was already firmly enmeshed in the middle-class culture of refined consumption, the advertising broadsides spoke to a consuming public who believed they were not yet fully integrated into this culture of urban consumption. While not as sharply critical as Stowe, rural advertisers and retailers tried to address the complications that came with connecting consumption to good citizenship, over a decade when the political loyalties and national borders were changing dramatically across the North.

One of the most popular ways to sell merchandise at mid century, especially with country store owners, was to assure customers that they would get cheap goods, at cost, rather than at the inflated prices that came from paying middle men to get the goods from the metropolitan centers. Promising their customers that they could and should enjoy the democratization of goods in America, country retailers became skilled in assuring their patrons that the best in cheap prices was not just a bargain but a political entitlement. While many of these store owners used humorous language, a bombastic tone and a plethora of images to catch the eye, they also promised their customers that they were being treated with a respect and gentility that made them the equal of anyone else. Retailers gave their word that their patrons were getting the same prices in the rural hinterlands as those customers who shopped in the urban centers back east.

Nathan McCoy, a retailer from Plymouth New Hampshire excelled in this rhetoric. He promised to make his goods 20 percent cheaper than everyone else. “All I ask is that I may live as well as my fellow citizens” he argued in his advertisement. He promised he had no interest in “waxing fat” off the efforts of hard workers and no pretensions to live “in a style of luxuriance unknown among [his] customers.”²² Drawing on a language of republican egalitarianism, McCoy’s promise echoed the idea that all men should have equal access to goods. This was not simply economic justice, it was a core principle of what it meant to live as an independent citizen in America. Making the most of the controversy surrounding the Homestead Exemption Act of 1850, McCoy pointed out that while he would not take sides on the legislation, he was certain that if the people in the area bought “their GOODS at the *CHEAP CASH STORE, at Plymouth Village,*” they would “in half a dozen years, have *Houses of their Own!* In a healthy and pleasant region...with all the comforts of life about them and money in their pocket wherewith to pay their taxes...with a little something to help their children along in the matter of EDUCATION.”²³

McCoy’s decision to simultaneously use the contentious political situation to capture attention, while also sidestepping the rights and wrongs of the issue, was shrewd. The passage of the Homestead Exemption Act, which in New Hampshire would have protected \$500 worth of each individual’s property from being taken by creditors regardless of debts owed, raised questions for many about what legal protections from the market individuals could expect and what economic guarantees a citizen should

²² Nathan McCoy, *Homestead Exemption* (Concord, N.H.: Tripp and Osgood, 1851), American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass., (hereafter AAS).

²³ *Ibid.* See also Bucklin, Clark & Co., *Something New!* (Boston: Jenks, printer 86 Hanover Street, Boston, 1850), AAS.

demand.²⁴ McCoy's advertisement attempted to harness those fears and expectations and use them to promote his store. Indeed, he argued that it was the way an individual consumed, and not any legislation, that would guarantee individuals the property and lifestyle that befit them as American citizens. Thus McCoy made it clear that by paying with cash, consumers could save enough money to own land, pay taxes, stay out of debt and *still* enjoy the fruits of their labor in the form of dry goods. As McCoy saw it, this was the essence of good citizenship in the United States and the embodiment of the American way of life.²⁵

McCoy was not alone in his effort to connect the consumption of dry goods to an egalitarian marketplace. "I am determined to repulse if not entirely vanquish the great 'RAW HEAD AND BLOODY BONES' MONSTROUS PRICES AND MURDEROUS PROFITS which has settled on our whole country like a mighty Incubus," announced Emory Dunreith Coffin, a small dry goods store owner in Indiana in 1859.²⁶ [Fig.6. 1] Coffin's promise to keep prices as low as they would be for customers back east also drew on the idea that all hard working Americans deserved the same kind of access to the marketplace. He offered this entitlement to his customers by promising to buy straight from the east coast manufacturers in order to protect his customers from "paying the *Extra Tariff*" that was incurred when middle-men took their cut. He also assured his customers that as "honest, industrious, frugal prompt paying men who struggle[d] hard

²⁴ Paul Goodman, "The Emergence of Homestead Exemption in the United States: Accommodation and Resistance to the Market Revolution, 1840-1880," *The Journal of American History*, 80 (Sep. 1993): 472.

²⁵ On the centrality of land and property ownership to the republican vision of citizenship see Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, xxiv-38; on the importance of staying out of debt see Bruce Mann, *Republic of Debtors, Bankruptcy in the Age of American Independence*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002); and on education see Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

²⁶ Emory Dunreith Coffin, *In the Field with a terrible array of Dry Goods* (Philadelphia: Duross Brothers, 1859), Library Company of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA., (hereafter LCP).

against the pressure of the times to pay their contracts,” he would not limit their ability to buy goods by raising his prices to cover his own costs of doing business with customers who didn’t pay on time. As Coffin’s customers, shoppers would be relieved “from paying *other people’s debts* through this levy of *extra per cent*.” Coffin drew on a time honored rhetoric that dated back to Democratic-Republican characterizations of the yeoman farmer.²⁷ The independent producer would be rewarded for his own hard work and the irresponsible and effete, who had once been the British and were now corrupt Americans, would be cut out of the virtuous political economy Coffin claimed to sustain.

However, the figures on Coffin’s poster were hardly depictions of yeomen farmers. Instead, Coffin emblazoned an image of stylish men and women strolling across the top of his broadside. His decision is a reminder that as a retail man, he was not attempting to halt the spread of fashionable culture. Instead, his efforts suggest an attempt to connect the middle-class marketplace to an older republican rhetoric and inspire his customers to do the same. What is significant however is that the language on his broadside appealed directly to men. Perhaps his decision was unsurprising. He was after all attempting to connect the marketplace to a political vision. Thus, like other retailers, he chose to address himself to the only real actors in the body politic, male citizens.

Shop keepers bolstered the promise of economic democracy with the assurance that they would treat all customers with equal respect and civility, using a mode of address that befit a democratic marketplace. Chamberlain, Barnard & Co., a Worcester dry goods company, promised in their catalogue that “*every customer shall be treated candidly, respectfully and courteously*” and Coffin also assured patrons that he would

²⁷ Drew R. McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 48-75.

offer “careful, genteel association to everyone.”²⁸ A catalogue published by the Philadelphia linen dealers Sheppard, Van Harlingen & Arrison in 1857, suggested that their own catalogue was a way of redressing the ways in which unequal distribution of commercial knowledge made the marketplace unfair. “Every person has experienced the difficulty, when about to make a purchase, of knowing exactly where to inquire for the article of which they were in quest,” the authors of the catalogue acknowledged. “This difficulty, embarrassing even to citizens, is greatly increased in the case of strangers, occasionally visiting the city, who are compelled to depend either on the kind offices of others, to buy at every disadvantage of price and assortment, or frequently seek for what they need in vain.”²⁹ Promising that their catalogue redressed this imbalance (both for commercial and individual consumers), these linen dealers attempted to assuage the fears of country consumers, by providing them with the information they needed to enter as equals into the urban marketplace. In all these ways, rural and urban shop keepers connected consumption to a distinctive vision of political economy and citizenship. It was an ideal that encompassed what it meant to live in both a political and economic democracy and while opportunistic, it provided a commercial counterpoint to the political rhetoric of free labor and free soil in the 1850s.³⁰

²⁸ Chamberlin, Barnard & Co, *Catalogue of Dry Goods, Millinery, Haberdashery, Carpets, Upholstery, House-Keeping and Furnishing Goods* (Worcester: Earle & Drew, 1854), 1. Coffin, *In the field with a terrible array of Dry Goods*.

²⁹ Sheppard, Van Harlingen & Arrison, *Sheppard, Van Harlingen & Arrison, Importers and Dealers in Linens, House Furnishing Dry Goods, Curtains, Curtain Materials and Upholstery Goods in General* (Philadelphia: Henry B. Ashmead, 1857).

³⁰ That these promises did nothing to actually create an economic democracy is one of the ironies of this whole discussion. Eric Foner has argued in *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, that the focus on the freedom to form contracts’ disguised the more pressing inequity created by a rising system of wage labor. Similarly, it seems clear that consumers’ attention to pricing and the systems of credit and treatment in store hid the more serious problem of a growing inequality in the distribution of wealth in America.

With this tradition already in place it is hardly surprising that with the declaration of war in 1861, advertisers and shopkeepers took advantage of new commercial opportunities and made the same economic promises a part of the politics of the Union cause. In the early years of the war, a number of retailers offered citizens the chance to make their consumption a civic activity in a variety of different ways. Drawing on the same humorous tone that their predecessors had used, some retailers and advertisers chose to impose the fight for the Union directly on top of the fight for a more democratic marketplace in an attempt to make the two causes one and the same. S. Barlow Espy, a dry goods store owner from Shelbyville in southern Illinois, who would later enlist in the 115th Illinois Volunteer Infantry, literally framed Emory Dunreith Coffin's advert from 1859 as a Union argument by surrounding the same text with a completely different border. In the poster he had made up in 1861, Espy copied Coffin's belligerent appeal to convert to the cash system verbatim on to his own poster. But he replaced the graphic of well-dressed men and women with four ranks of Union soldiers, as well as a picture of a Union camp, a general and a battle charge. Over the top of this Espy had the words "Another War Declared. Great Slaughter Anticipated! 'Watchword: Give Nor Ask any Quarters.'³¹

In this way, Espy provided a new context for Coffin's earlier argument for an egalitarian marketplace. He framed it as a part of the Union cause, suggesting that the equality that came with a fair and just marketplace was an integral part of the ideology that Union supporters now fought for. While U.S. soldiers would fight further afield, the

³¹ Stephen Barlow Espy, *Another War Declared. Great Slaughter Anticipated* (Philadelphia: Duross Brothers, 1861), LCP. In this poster the soldiers were actually in the uniform worn by American soldiers in the War of 1812, suggesting that Espy had ordered the poster so quickly that the printing firm, Duross Brothers, had not had time to cut an updated woodblock. My thanks to Zara Anishanlin Bernhardt for pointing out the uniform discrepancy.

men and women who stayed at home could support the cause by patronizing his store. It was no coincidence that the broadside looked like a recruiting poster. Espy wanted to elide the ideas of shopping with fighting for the cause. He blurred the lines between civilian and military acts still further when he made his dry goods store into the local recruiting center.³² In southern Illinois, where not every customer would have been a stolid supporter of the Union, shoppers at Espy's store could display a local allegiance to their national politics, and make themselves a part of a larger battle for the hearts and minds of the Union.

Espy was not the only retailer to deploy this strategy. P. & C. Templeton of Brady's Bend, Pennsylvania also chose to use the same text as Coffin in May 1861.³³ Templeton did not provide the Union imagery but he did direct his advertisement to the attention of "Union Men" and placed at the bottom the image of a man waving the "Stars and Stripes" with the banner "The Union and the Constitution" over the top of it. Templeton also announced that "Secession had produced a wonderful change in prices" and that a "Slaughter" was anticipated, a line which was funny in the spring of 1861 when confidence in the Union cause remained high and Northern armies had still not seen battle. Templeton's bannerhead united the fight against the Confederacy with an attack on high prices, linking the availability of cheap goods with the Union cause. Addressing themselves for the most part to men, the rural retailers worked hard to suggest that buying the domestic goods one wanted at a fair price was an entitlement that was available only in the Union. Similarly, in May of 1861, residents of Hanover, Ohio might have been

³² Isaac Henry Clay Royse, LL. B., *History of the 115th Regiment Illinois Volunteer Infantry* (Terre Haute, IND.: Published by the author with the authority of the Regimental Association, 1900), 369.

³³ S.C & Fox, *Secession has produced a wonderful change in the price of goods*, (Philadelphia: Duross Brothers, 1861), LCP.

forgiven for thinking that the latest broadside to be plastered all over town was a recruitment poster for the local militia. Under a bold black heading that stated “The Union must and shall be Preserved,” four serried ranks of soldiers stood to attention and in their midst stood a man, waving an American flag with gusto. But if the citizens of Hanover had continued to read, they would have discovered that this broadside was in fact an advertisement for McCan & Arter’s Dry Goods Store. Eschewing the usual depictions of elegant ladies and urbane gentlemen, McCan and Arter had instead seized the moment of the South’s secession not only to advertise their “Spring and Summer Goods” but also to connect the act of shopping for their new and fashionable stock with support for the Union cause.³⁴ [Fig.6.2] In Claysburg, Pennsylvania, shopkeeper G.W Mouk brought his groceries and clothing to the attention of “Union Men” just as Benjamin Ramage, the merchant from Enon, Pennsylvania had called his customers “Volunteers.”³⁵ In doing so both Ramage and Mouk implied that consumers, like soldiers, could sign up to fight for the Union cause, offering up their shopping as service. Referring to their stock as munitions and their shops as military headquarters, men like Ramage and Mouk only reinforced the idea that consumers had a specific part to play in waging war against the slave holding powers of the Confederacy. In all, these small time merchants from across the Union jumped on the opportunity to fuse consumption and patriotism, offering consumers a seemingly new way to perform their civic duty.

Whether consumers were convinced or not, these advertisers connected the idea that access to consumer goods and the middle-class marketplace of the metropolitan east

³⁴ McCan & Arter, *The Union Must and Shall Be Preserved* (Philadelphia: Duross Brothers, 1861), LCP.

³⁵ Benjamin Ramage, *Attention Volunteers*; G.W. Mouk, *Attention Union Men* (Philadelphia: Duross Brothers, 1861), LCP. See also, *5000 U.S. Volunteers wanted to assist in carrying off part of these goods. The National Union Store, just opened this day...* (Washington, D.C.: H.Polk, 1861), Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/rbpehtml/> [accessed March 23, 2009].

was a central facet of the Union cause and intimated in their marketing that access to cheap goods was a civic entitlement. Thus in the early months of the war, when shoppers still had money to spend and the devastation of the conflict was as yet unknown, retailers like Espy, Templeton, McCan and Arter, Mouk and Ramage worked hard to frame the act of buying goods as a patriotic act, one that asserted a truly American identity and helped to fight the South symbolically in the process. Appealing to consumers by promising them cheap goods under a Union bannerhead, retailers associated the democratization of consumer goods with the Union cause. Over time, the terrible shortages in the South, coupled with Jefferson Davies' fury over the wealthy's wasteful consumption of luxury items in the Confederacy, made the association between material prosperity and Union success seem all the more convincing.³⁶

One printing company was particularly astute in the ways they linked the purchase of dry goods to the strength of the Union cause. The Philadelphia printing firm Duross Brothers which was located in Black Horse Alley near Front Street produced a wide array of pro-Union advertisements for dry goods stores across the country in 1861.³⁷ Their national reach was in part due to their ability to maintain the loyalty of former local clients, even after those customers had left Philadelphia. The Elfelt brothers provide one such example. A wealthy Jewish family, whose parents had emigrated from Haiti to Philadelphia after the Revolution in 1801, these brothers emigrated to Minnesota in 1849. Establishing a dry goods store in St. Paul, they apparently preferred to return to Philadelphia on occasion, perhaps mixing business errands with a visit to their family. In 1861 it seems that the Elfelts took the opportunity to do something more. They

³⁶ Thornton and Ekelund, *Tariffs, Blockades and Inflation*, 29-58.

³⁷ This includes all the stores just discussed.

commissioned an advertisement for their store from the Duross firm.³⁸ Similarly Steven Barlow Espy, whose store was in Illinois, had made his way west only after completing his education in Franklin, Pennsylvania.³⁹ A native of the Quaker State, Espy probably commissioned advertising from the Duross Brothers because he had contacts in Philadelphia as well as knowledge of the local market and business community. Connections such as these meant that one printing firm could influence advertising imagery and message across a broad swath of territory, making the Duross Brother's vision of patriotic consumption a vision which had a truly national scope.

The similarity in message and image that can be seen in the Duross Brothers broadsides was in part a result of the practices of placing job printing orders. Thus the Elfelt Brothers in Minnesota could order a broadside which was almost an exact replica of John B. Prices's broadside which was posted up in Ashland, Pennsylvania. [Fig. 6.3] Working in conjunction with the shop-keepers, it is likely that the Duross Brothers, like other printing firms such as Philadelphia based firm King and Baird, offered their clients a book or sheet of pre-cut images to choose from and displayed sample advertising for their clients to preview.⁴⁰ [Fig.6.4] This process permitted a set of familiar icons to spread across the Union, as these posters travelled beyond the metropolitan centers of the east. In practical terms, this meant that different retailers found themselves

³⁸ On the Elfelt brothers see Henry Anson Castle, *History of St. Paul and Vicinity: A Chronicle of Progress and a Narrative Account of the Industries, Institutions and People of the City and Its Tributary Territory* (Chicago and New York: Lewis Publishing Company, 1912), 54; *Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society*, XV (St. Paul, Minn.: Published by the Society, May 1915), 543-544; Henry Carman Folsom and Elijah Evan Edwards, *Fifty Years in the Northwest* (n.p.: Pioneer Press Co., 1888), 564.

³⁹ Royse, *History of the 115th Regiment Illinois Volunteer Infantry*, 369.

⁴⁰ Without the business papers of the Duross Brothers it is hard to know if this is precisely how clients placed orders and what options printing firms offered their customers. However, the identical nature of many of the images and the existence of specimen sheets for other firms suggests this as a possibility. Thank-you to Wendy Woloson at the Library Company of Philadelphia for suggesting to me how printing firms would have organized this part of their business.

commissioning very similar advertisements to one another, and it was because of this particular business practice that so many different communities across America in 1861 saw broadsides that urged them to connect their purchases with their support of the Union in similar ways.

In all, the advertisement of dry goods in the early days of the war strove to connect the explosion of patriotism to an older vision that placed the consumption of dry goods into a framework of northern free soil political economy. Whether the consumers of these small towns themselves imagined this connection was not clear, but retailers certainly went out of their way to flesh out this vision of the shopper and suggest that their consumption was not only sustaining the Union but was one of the rights of Union citizenship. Retailers, no doubt, made these assertions in order to make money but that did not mean these connections did not have a wider currency. In fact, by 1860, the members of the Republican Party were also struggling to make sense of the citizen's economic obligations and entitlements when it came to consumption, not through a consideration of the retail dry goods trade, but through a fierce political debate over the merits of once again resurrecting tariffs in order to protect American manufacturing.

The Republican decision to return to tariffs as a primary means of raising revenue marked the end of the free trade ascendancy that America had experienced since 1846. The success of the Walker Tariff in promoting prosperity by lowering duties across the board had silenced the pro-tariff Whigs throughout the 1840s and 1850s. Even Lincoln, a Whig supporter of Henry Clay's American System, who favored tariffs as a measure to protect American industry and workers, kept quiet on the subject. This trend seemed confirmed

by the passage of the Tariff of 1857, which lowered duties still further, particularly on iron and raw wool.⁴¹ But the economic panic of that year cast doubt into the minds of many Americans as to the wisdom of dispensing entirely with tariffs. Even though the depression that followed the Panic was far shorter than anyone might have predicted, vocal tariff proponents such as Horace Greeley, editor of the New York *Tribune*, were quick to connect the economic disaster to America's lack of tariff protection.⁴²

Manufacturers in Pennsylvania and the northeast were particularly fearful of what might happen to their interests, not to mention the American economy as a whole, without the protection of the tariff to sustain American industry against the depredations of foreign commerce. While mercantile New Yorkers and Southern cotton exporters continued to extol the virtues of a low tariff, even after the financial disasters of 1857, the Panic proved to be the beginning of the end for free trade policy in nineteenth century America.

Nowhere was this more clear than in the Republican Party's decision after 1857 to make tariff the center of their party platform, particularly in states where the voting public viewed the anti-slavery agenda with suspicion. While historians such as Eric Foner have noted that the issue of the tariff was not as important as the ideology of free soil and anti-slavery in defining the Republican Party and destroying the Union, the tariff nonetheless played an important role in the pre-war electoral politics that brought the party to power in 1860.⁴³ The Republican commitment to tariff as a policy had begun in

⁴¹ Reinhard H. Luthin, "Abraham Lincoln and the Tariff," *American Historical Review* 49 (Jul. 1944): 611. See also Taussig, *The Tariff History of the United States*, 115-154.

⁴² McPherson, *Battle Cry for Freedom*, 192

⁴³ Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, see particularly chapter 8. Foner explains that he intended to bring new insight to the "irrepressible conflict" thesis by concentrating on the ideological discussions about free labor versus slave labor rather than look at the different economic policies of each section as Charles and Mary Beard and Arthur Cole had done. Thus he downplayed the Republicans' support for the tariff, centralized banking and internal improvements as the reason for the South's secession. For two classic accounts that make the tariff more central see Charles and Mary Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization*

earnest four years before Lincoln's election. In 1856, the Free Soil Party – the Republican Party's immediate partisan predecessor – had proved unable to find their way to the White House and a significant reason for that disappointment had been the failure to capture the electoral votes of Pennsylvania.⁴⁴ The setback did not go unnoticed. In the Congressional elections of 1858, Republican candidates in Pennsylvania experimented with blaming the Panic of the 1857 on the existing low tariff regime and their efforts apparently paid off. In that year, Republican congressional candidates lost only six of Pennsylvania's twenty-five seats, a margin sufficient to convince even lukewarm protectionists that tariff was a policy that could yield political dividends.⁴⁵

Attempting to capitalize on this knowledge, some Republicans began to push forward on the issue. In August 1859, Justin S. Morrill, the Republican representative from Vermont, sponsored a bill that promised to dramatically raise tariffs, hoping to force the Democratic-controlled Senate to accept or defeat it. While Morrill hoped for the success of the bill, he was equally anxious to force a debate that would publically identify the Republican party as the party of protection.⁴⁶ It was an astute strategy and it proved its worth in 1860, when Pennsylvania Republicans used the protectionist plank to divert the voters' attention away from their party's more radical positions on anti-slavery that had traction among Philadelphia's Quaker abolitionists but were far from universally popular. Thus in Pennsylvania, that critical and powerful state that Free Soilers had lost

(New York: Macmillan, 1927) and Arthur Cole *The Irrepressible Conflict 1850-1865* (New York: Macmillan, 1934). For more recent discussions of the tariff as a plank of the Republican party's platform see McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 192; Gallman, *Mastering Wartime*, 3 and Luthin, "Abraham Lincoln," 611-614.

⁴⁴ Gallman, *Mastering Wartime*, 3.

⁴⁵ "The 36th Congress," *The Biographical Directory of the United States 1774-2005*, H. Doc 108-222 (United States: Government Printing Office, 2005) 158-161.

www.gpoaccess.gov/serialset/cdocuments/hd108-222/index.html [accessed March 11, 2009].

⁴⁶ Luthin, "Abraham Lincoln," 612.

in 1856, Lincoln obscured his anti-slavery platform behind the popularity of protectionism and ran at the top of the pro-tariff, People's Party ticket. This decision proved successful. He secured 57 percent of the state's vote thus winning Pennsylvania and ultimately the presidential election.⁴⁷

Ever the astute politician, on the national stage Lincoln distanced himself from Morrill and other highly vocal supporters of tariff. He adopted instead a moderate stance on tariffs, a decision shaped by his desire to capture the support of northern Democratic voters who were deserting their own party by 1859 but still remained in favor of free trade. Similarly, other Republicans who had supported the tariff in the past understood that despite its popularity in Pennsylvania, Delaware and New Jersey, the tariff was not as well-liked in western states. Out west, consumers already paid a premium for manufactured goods because of their distance from New York or New Orleans and they resented the additional imposition of duties that drove the cost of their consumption up further still. In addition, as exporters of grain, they feared that a truly stringent tariff would damage their ability to sell to foreign countries such as England. As a result of this calculation, eastern Republicans soft-peddled their attachment to the tariff at the party convention in 1860, as they attempted to accommodate western voters and their representatives.⁴⁸

While some Republicans were campaigning, those already in government were pushing to get the tariff on the legislative agenda. In March 1860, Justin Morrill introduced a tariff bill into Congress. He labeled the bill as a revenue raising tariff,

⁴⁷ Gallman, *Mastering Wartime*, 3.

⁴⁸ Luthin, "Abraham Lincoln" 615-623. Luthin notes that Lincoln was able to carry California and Oregon by a slim margin in part because of the Democratic schism and in part because of the promise to develop railroads and harbors, an issue that was important to both these states.

attempting to allay the fears of its Southern opponents, who feared that a protective tariff would provoke Britain and France to enact retaliatory measures that would make it less profitable to export cotton. However, Morrill's efforts were futile and Southern politicians opposed the bill vehemently. It was clear that Morrill had every intention of providing protection for both wool manufacturers and Pennsylvania's iron producers. In the main, the bill dispensed with the older *ad valorem* duties on imported goods and imposed specific duties on most items from bar iron to Brussels carpeting, a maneuver that raised duties overall.⁴⁹ His initial lack of success in getting the bill through Congress was due in large part due to the efforts made by Southern senators to prevent the bill from coming out of committee in the winter of 1860. But in the early days of 1861, these deep-south senators from Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana and Mississippi followed South Carolina's lead and withdrew from the Senate. By late January, the bill was out of committee and by March 2nd 1861, President Lincoln signed the Morrill Tariff into law.⁵⁰

The Republican Party's commitment to a tariff was tested even before the revised duties came into force. In mid-March, with the institution of the new tariff only weeks away, the New York *Herald*, itself an anti-tariff publication, reported that the Confederacy was refusing to hand over the duties it had collected under Federal law, a sum that amounted to two million dollars. This refusal to pay was not surprising since the imposition of tariffs was (and had been since 1828) a part of the larger struggle over the extent to which the federal government's authority superseded the power of the individual states. Worse news for the Union however, was that the Confederacy was

⁴⁹ *Statutes at Large* 12 (1861), 178-198.

⁵⁰ Coy F. Cross, *Justin Smith Morrill Father of the Land-Grant Colleges* (East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State University Press, 1999), 50.

threatening to bring into force their own economic policy after May 1st, a policy which at its most basic level made those southern states into a free trade confederacy.⁵¹

For New York merchants in particular, this prospect was alarming. The possibility that the Confederacy might become a permanent free trade nation on their southern border presented a serious threat to their long term prosperity. Nor did the merchants have to wait long before the ramifications of the South's free trade policy began to take effect. "European imports" the New York *Herald* reported, were "arriving at New Orleans or any other city within the limits of the Southern confederacy and paying the low duty prescribed by the Southern tariff."⁵² These imports were then "shipped by these Mississippi boats to all points in the Northwestern and border States without any regard for the exorbitant provisions of the Northern Morrill Tariff."⁵³ As the article went on to note, there was no way that the federal government could collect duties on these goods. Once landed at New Orleans there was no structure in place to control the traffic of goods and merchandise could travel duty free as far as St. Paul, Minnesota. As a result, both the Confederacy and the southern merchants would receive the money that was rightly the property of the Union and its merchants.⁵⁴ Nor did the newspaper's editors expect the American consumer to rectify this problem.

"No-one supposes that, with these facilities to buy cheap elsewhere, the Northwest will seek a market in the North Atlantic cities, where a high protective tariff will after the 1st of April, almost exclude the articles most necessary to its existence or that its sagacious and frugal population will purchase the cotton goods of New England and the iron manufacturers of Pennsylvania out of pure patriotism or loyalty to the government at Washington, if they can get the same

⁵¹"Thurlow Weed and the Irrepressible Conflict Between Two Tariffs" (New York) *Herald*, March 16, 1861. The Confederates took the rejection of the tariff extremely seriously, even including a clause in their constitution that prevented them from using import tariffs as a protective device and would have kept tariffs very low. See Thornton and Eklund, *Tariffs, Blockades and Inflation*, 23.

⁵²"A Significant Item from the South" (New York) *Herald*, March 16, 1861.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

articles of foreign manufacture cheaper either in the South or in the British provinces.”⁵⁵

Free traders like the *Herald* did not believe it was the consumer’s responsibility to boycott goods for a political cause. Thus articulating what was, by 1861, a classic position for free traders, the New York *Herald* maintained that even in the face of national disaster, the consumer should expect to buy at the lowest price possible. Looking for someone to blame, the *Herald’s* editors pointed the finger at what they considered to be an ill advised policy and screamed for the Morrill tariff to be dismantled.

Yet even with the dire predictions that the South would grow fat at the expense of the North, the Republicans did not back away from protectionism as a policy. Instead, on April 19th, before the South could bring their free trade policy into full effect, the Union Navy led a blockade against Southern ports. By June of the same year, thirty-six blockade ships were patrolling the Southern coastline. While the blockade was never watertight, its presence prevented war-wary British ships from trading with the South. This infuriated the Confederacy, who not only needed England to continue to trade with them, but also had hoped that England would enter the war on their side. In a blundering effort to persuade the English to join them, they embargoed all their cotton exports to Great Britain, hoping that this would prove to British mill owners the necessity of supporting the South, if for nothing more than the sake of their own cotton supply. But British Prime Minister Lord Russell and Lord Palmerston resented the economic blackmail and refused to become involved, a severe blow to Confederate hopes.⁵⁶ As a result, the Morrill tariff did not turn out to be the body blow that the Union free traders had predicted, although

⁵⁵ “The Advantageous Position of the Northwest” (New York) *Herald* March 17, 1861.

⁵⁶ McPherson, *Battle Cry for Freedom*, 313-316, 369, 383-384.

the tactical success could not really be credited to the Republicans. Their commitment to the policy of protectionism however, seemed undaunted.

By July 1861, Lincoln's government had bigger problems to face than Confederate rejection of tariff policy.⁵⁷ When war had broken out in April, not only was the tiny U.S. army of 16,000 men scattered across the trans-Mississippi west but a third of the army's officers, a majority of its clerks and four of the previous secretaries of war had come from the South and had promptly deserted. Moreover, the weak and floundering War Department – headed by Simon Cameron – seemed unable to gauge what it would need in the way of men and materiel to fight a war against the Confederacy. As a result, between April and July a chaotic scramble to muster soldiers and gather supplies yielded a haphazard, albeit enthusiastic, war effort in the North.⁵⁸ The question of how to raise the necessary revenues to fund the war was approached in a similarly scattershot way. It was only in July 1861, that Lincoln's government gathered for an emergency session of Congress in an attempt to find new ways to fund Cameron's flailing bureaucracy. Lincoln had spent the last three months waging a war without funds. Now he turned to the Republican Congress and asked them to prepare to take extraordinary measures.⁵⁹

The speed with which Republicans decided to use the tariff to help them fund the war effort was unsurprising. Salmon P. Chase, the newly appointed Secretary of the Treasury, suffered from lack of experience. Thus he resorted to a well established and familiar formula, the policy used by Albert Gallatin, Jefferson's Secretary of the Treasury

⁵⁷ McPherson, *Battle Cry for Freedom*, 312-313.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 323 and Wilson, *The Business of Civil War*, 23.

⁵⁹ McPherson *Battle Cry Freedom*, 308-312 and Cross, *Justin Smith Morrill*, 59-60.

during the War of 1812.⁶⁰ This policy used the tariff as the primary means to raise revenue for the government, tapping in to the nation's reliance on imported goods to ensure that the nation was well funded. Certain of the tariff's success in raising funds, Chase's support of the tariff in July helped to ensure the passage of the War Tariff on August 5th 1861. However, as should by now be clear, the War Tariff, that Republicans pushed through with such urgency in the wake of the disastrous Battle of Bull Run, was in no way a knee jerk reaction. As a piece of legislation it represented both a carefully constructed partisan political strategy and a return to a central tenet in American political economy. Moreover, the fact that the Republicans had continued to support the tariff, even as it apparently jeopardized the northern war effort by diverting revenues from the ports of New York and Philadelphia and into Southern coffers, only served to highlight the tariff was more than a fiscal measure. Instead, it was a policy that Republicans believed to be key to upholding the principles of the Union. As an article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* put it in August of 1861, "our tariff...is simply and solely our own concern, needed for the comfort of our people and also to sustain a great war for Law and Right."⁶¹ The *Inquirer* made it clear that the tariff was the only way to bring financial "comfort" to the majority of the populace through its protection of wages. Yet the Republicans firm support of the tariff only served to ensure that the policy would be controversial. As political wrangling over the tariff ensued, the debate became focused on the whether the citizen was obligated to fund the nation's most crucial undertakings through his or her consumption.

⁶⁰ Lawson, *Patriot Fires*, 42.

⁶¹ "Our Tariff" *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Aug. 31, 1861.

The discussions that accompanied both tariff bills through Congress revealed the extent to which politicians had come to understand protectionism as both the consumer's burden and the citizen's obligation by 1861. Arguing for the wholesale adoption of the Morrill Tariff in February 1861, Galusha A. Grow, the Representative from Pennsylvania, argued that, "the most important obligation the people have is to keep the Treasury afloat," even if the government had to lay a tax on every item that came into the country.⁶² For protectionists, like Grow, the self-interested desire to see a tariff pass combined with the belief that American citizens were obliged to maintain their government through the tax they paid on imported items. Others were less sanguine about what and who ought to be taxed. John Cochrane of New York worried that "the duties levied in this bill, upon which an increase of revenue [was] to be expected, [were] not for the most part upon the luxuries of consumption but upon the necessities of consumption."⁶³ Cochrane's distinction became the very crux of the debate over the Morrill Tariff. While few participants in the debates disputed that the way to raise revenue in America was through the taxation of the consumer of imported goods, most politicians wanted to tax only luxury goods. That way, as Horace Mayard of Tennessee argued, only wealthy consumers would have to pay tax because they were purchasing items they wanted but did not need, and the question of "whether they [would] have to pay duty or not [was] a matter of choice."⁶⁴

But necessity was a problematic category in a society that imagined consumer goods as signs of political superiority. In the 1850s, advertisers and retailers had talked about the material goods citizens could expect to have untaxed and unfettered access to as

⁶² *Congressional Globe* 37th Cong. 1st Sess. (1861), 1189.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 1187.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 1188.

Northern consumers. Charles Lester's identification of the carpet in his *Glances at the Metropolis*, an advertising publication from 1854, was a perfect example. Lester had claimed that the citizen's ability to have a carpet in his or her home was a sign of America's success as a capitalist democracy. In 1861, that claim took on a new political valence, when the Morrill Tariff attempted to levy a tax of 40 cents per square yard on carpeting.⁶⁵ Unsurprisingly, the clause generated controversy. Missouri Congressman, John B. Clark, argued that "carpets [were] doubtless a fair subject of taxation, being of almost universal use." But that he did not like the fact that the expensive carpets – the Wiltons, Saxony, Aubussons and Axminsters – were taxed at the same rate as the cheaper Brussels carpet, which was the floor covering that most Americans bought.⁶⁶ As Clark noted, the inclusion of the Brussels carpeting was a deliberate attempt to protect the Massachusetts manufacturer who had patented technology to reproduce the Brussels carpets but could not do it as inexpensively as foreign producers. While Clark clearly objected to the blatant protectionism in a law ostensibly designed to raise revenue rather than shelter weak industry, his argument suggests that he believed the cheap carpet to be one of the items in life that Americans could consider themselves entitled to. Clark's efforts proved futile and Brussels carpeting was taxed at the same rate as its more expensive counterparts. Thus, the jubilant claims that Lester had made in the early 1850s, that universal access to carpets marked the dawning of the "age of luxury" were less secure under the pressures of war.

In fact, the Morrill Tariff levied a heavy tax on all imported home furnishings and textiles by the spring of 1861, driving up the price of these goods overall. It was a fact

⁶⁵ C. Edwards Lester, *Glances at the metropolis: a hundred illustrated gems* (New York: I.D Guyer, 1854), 65, 89, 99.

⁶⁶ *Congressional Globe* 37th Cong. 1st Sess. (1861), 1194.

that generated discontent in many quarters. “During the late Presidential campaign republican speakers, orators and writers were never tired of talking about the poor, of freedom, free labor and free everything else,” scoffed the New York *Herald* in March of 1861. “[But] what are their practices? They have passed a tariff which imposes prohibitory taxes on the importation of heavy woollen [sic] goods, such as pilot cloths, used by the masses for overcoats, and also on coarse blankets, flannels, broadcloths, heavy coarse carpets, hosiery &c., while fine qualities of broadcloths, cassimeres, blankets, flannels &c., worn chiefly by the rich have a light duty imposed on them, as they are all taxed by weight.”⁶⁷ Similarly, Lazarus Powell, the Democratic Senator from Kentucky, complained to his colleagues that the tariff simply meant to “impos[e] excessive duties on consumption.”⁶⁸ Claiming that the Morrill Tariff was not designed to raise revenue, but would instead protect Pennsylvania interest groups, New York free traders argued that the tariff “sacrificed the general interests of the country to a few manufacturers, causing the whole body of consumers throughout the country, North, South, East and West, to pay an advanced price for articles of clothing and other necessities in order to enrich a handful of men.”⁶⁹ It was an argument that hit a nerve as the hardships of a wartime economy began to make themselves felt.

Protectionists countered this free trade argument by insisting that paying taxes on consumption was a civic duty. As Robert McKnight from Pennsylvania pointed out, “in the present exigency of the country, when the Treasury is bankrupt...I think there is not a constituent of any man in this House who would not consent to have a duty levied on

⁶⁷ “The Republican Party and their Professions for the Poor” New York *Herald*, March 31, 1861.

⁶⁸ Lazarus Powell, *Congressional Globe* 37th Cong. 1st Sess., (July 29, 1861) 321. Powell’s autobiographical details can be found at www.bioguide.congress.gov [accessed March 11, 2009].

⁶⁹ “Congress and the Morrill Tariff,” New York *Herald*, June 16, 1861.

articles of this sort in order to extricate the country from bankruptcy.”⁷⁰ This turned out not be the case and when the Morrill Tariff passed in March 1861, coffee and tea – two particularly contentious items - remained on the duty free list. However, McKnight’s use of the words “consent” and “constituent” revealed a very particular conception of citizenship, one that framed the consumer’s decision to buy goods at a higher price as a civic obligation that American citizens agreed to undertake. McKnight’s decision to call the undertaking consensual seems particularly significant, hinting that his thoughts were underpinned by a vision of the kind of contractual relations that bound the free American citizen to his polity.

McKnight was the only politician to make an implied reference to the social contract in the early spring of 1861.⁷¹ But he was not the last politician to claim that the people had a duty to pay higher prices on consumer goods, in order to sustain the nation in its time of need. As James F. Simmons of Rhode Island argued in July 1861, the need to finance the war was not just a question of survival but one of principle. “This nation,” he declaimed, “is entering upon a page of its history which in my judgment, is destined to make it the most renowned the world has ever known. This imposes on us all, as individuals as well as upon the nation, responsibilities...such as we have been unaccustomed to and which no other circumstance would have laid upon us...believing this I am ready to begin to provide for the obligations it will impose. When this is done, the genius of freedom will say to her votaries everywhere...whenever our standard winnows the buxom air: be not afraid, it is I.”⁷² William Pitt Fessenden, chair of the

⁷⁰ *Congressional Globe* 36th Cong. 2nd Sess. (1861), 1187.

⁷¹ On the growing centrality of contract in American political, social and legal life see Eric Foner, *Free Soil Free Labor, Free Men*. See also Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract*.

⁷² *Congressional Globe* 37th Cong. 1st Sess. (1861) 255.

Senate Finance Committee, was more pragmatic. Promising that the War Tariff would raise the necessary revenues, he argued that Americans needed importations and would be “willing to pay” the extra duty.⁷³

In the end, the pro-tariff forces won out. The imperatives of war pushed even the unwilling to acknowledge the need for revenues from all consumers. Congress raised the rate of duties and even removed tea and coffee from the duty free list. It was significant, however, that even the most passionate supporters of the tariff believed excessive duties to be an emergency measure. “The people expect, and are prepared to receive, a special tariff bill, increasing the rates of duties on sugar and such other articles as will bear increasing, and imposing a duty on tea and coffee, and all other articles now in the free list of which we import largely,” reported the pro-tariff *Philadelphia Inquirer*. But, the article continued, “such a bill should be designed specially for revenue and to meet the contingencies of the war and be repealed when the war is over, or the Government does not require the revenue, leaving the Tariff of 1861 for a fair trial.”⁷⁴ Conceding the obligation of the consumer to fund the government, American politicians and the Northern public at large reluctantly agreed that desperate times called for desperate measures. If taxation in a democracy represented the way in which the people decided to fund national projects and public interest, Union citizens in 1861 grudgingly conceded that consumers had a duty to financially sustain their government through their shopping.⁷⁵

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 317.

⁷⁴ “Let the Tariff of 1861 Alone” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 13, 1861.

⁷⁵ The idea that what the government taxes and what those taxes then fund represent the people’s will is articulated best by Robin L. Einhorn, *American Taxation, American Slavery* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 5.

Salmon P. Chase's initial assumption that tariff revenues could support the nation had not been completely unfounded. In 1861, customs revenue had provided 39.9 million dollars worth of revenue for the United States, out of a total of 41.5 million dollars for the fiscal year.⁷⁶ Yet it soon became clear that the tariff alone would not be able to fund the war. Indeed, by 1865, the 41.5 million dollars in fiscal revenues that the tariff generated would only be enough to cover the cost of ten days of war.⁷⁷ Seeking to extract revenue from both the rich and the poor, Chase not only asked for \$100 million loan in denominations of up to \$5,000 to sell to the rich, but also requested that Congress issue low-denomination Treasury bonds with high interest rates to sell to poorer citizens. Congress approved the sale of bonds worth \$250 million in the summer of 1861 and the task of selling these bonds went to the Philadelphia financier Jay Cooke, whose hard work and wily sales techniques helped Americans to funnel their patriotism into funding the war. Cooke's success was unprecedented but even so, the sale of bonds failed to produce enough revenue. At this juncture, the government began to simply print its own money. The passage of the Legal Tender Act in February 1862, made paper money or "greenbacks" legal currency in the United States, a measure that eventually raised \$450 million dollars for the Union cause.⁷⁸

Yet all these measures were not enough on their own and so, pushed by the emergency of war, the government turned back to the consumer. In June 1862, a new Internal Revenue Act taxed the production, distribution and purchase of nearly every

⁷⁶ John Joseph Wallis, "Federal Government Revenue, by source: 1789–1939." Table Ea588-593 in *Historical Statistics of the United States, Earliest Times to the Present: Millennial Edition*, ed., Susan B. Carter, Scott Sigmund Gartner, Michael R. Haines, Alan L. Olmstead, Richard Sutch, and Gavin Wright. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/ISBN-9780511132971.Ea584-678> [accessed Feb. 19, 2009].

⁷⁷ Paludan, *A People's Contest*, 109.

⁷⁸ Paludan, *A People's Contest*, 108-121; Lawson, *Patriot Fires*, 40-64; Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters*, 310-320.

consumer good available to Americans, as well as taxing income for the first time in the nation's history. Placing the heaviest tax burden on citizens that Americans had ever known, Congress laid direct taxes on property already purchased, from carriages and yachts to individual inheritances, as well as on goods and services of all kinds. As long as the mechanism of tariffs had been in place, politicians could claim that consumers had a choice on how much tax they wanted to pay, by refraining from the consumption of imported luxuries if need be.⁷⁹ By 1862, that choice had been taken away. Instead, the internal revenue system imposed taxes on American citizens that left little to choice. While nearly every profession and interest was asked to pay their share, the consumer was undeniably the hardest hit.

These drastic steps were clearly understood as a wartime measure. In the wake of the conflict, Republicans quickly phased out the excise taxes which had placed such a heavy burden on the poorest of America's consumers. But the tariff remained a central plank of the Republican party's agenda after the war, a policy that Democrats attacked without reserve for the high prices that drained consumers. Yet Republicans adhered to the tariff through the 1880s, using the tariff to pay off the war debts, thus transferring wealth from low income consumers to wealthy bondholders.⁸⁰ In this way, the experiences of the Civil War established that consumers of non-essential items had as obligation to help fund their government. But this burden did not demand self-restraint. The wartime tariff did not ask citizens to refrain from purchasing luxury foreign goods, as Jefferson had during the embargo, or the protectionists at the Institute had during the

⁷⁹ *Statutes at Large* 12 (1862) 432-489. See also Stanley, *Dimensions of Law in the Service of Order*, 25-33. Stanley has argued that the decision to tax consumption through the tariff in 1861 and income in 1862 was a choice American politicians made so as to avoid taxing land, which was seen as taxing the poor.

⁸⁰ "1866-1900: Reconstruction to the Spanish-American War," in "Tax History Museum" ed. Joseph J. Thorndike, www.tax.org/Museum/1866-1900.htm [accessed May 16, 2009].

1830s. In fact, the wartime tariff finally made the consumption of luxury goods into a civic virtue from which no-one was asked to refrain.⁸¹ While consumers were asked to pay an additional price for the privilege, the Civil War detached the consumption of imported luxury goods from the restraints of the antebellum political economy.

The changing ways in which the Union government funded the war may have lessened the restraints consumers imagined in relation to the demands of the nation's political economy, but shoppers were by no means released from the burdens that cultural mores placed on the practices of consumption. In fact, over the course of the war, consumption's symbolic importance gained additional force. In part this was because the older ideas about the significance of consumption as an indication of the superiority of the Union remained in place. Good quality clothes and domestic furnishings still symbolized the success of the North's political economy. However, as wartime inflation took hold, and the conflict seemed to benefit the wealthy rather than the poor, the practice of consumption became enmeshed in a new politics of representation.⁸² Tensions erupted about making and then spending large amounts of money, a pressure that was made worst by the fact that consumption was helping to fund the war effort itself.

The biggest focus of these tensions, particularly as the conflict wore on, was a group of wartime profiteers, whom the public identified by the excessive amounts of money these profiteers spent on showy consumer goods. While public anxiety blew the actions of these opportunistic merchants and manufacturers out of proportion, it remained the case that the war brought wealth to many, a result of Union methods of mobilizing for

⁸¹ Tariff and excise duties made up about 21 percent of the government's federal revenues during the war. See Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters*, 320.

⁸² On living standards and relative prices see Paludan, *A People's Contest*, 180.

war. Throughout the conflict, state militias and the federal army alike relied on the services of private businesses to supply the Union war effort. Brooks Brothers, for example, became one of the chief suppliers of Union uniforms and George Evans and William Hassall turned their thriving Ladies Dressing Trimming Business into a army knapsack wholesale trade.⁸³ While many businessmen made an honest profit from this very necessary business, accusations about unfairly awarded contracts and the sale of poor-quality products to the army were rife. The archetypal example of this immoral business was the sale of “shoddy” to the Union quartermaster’s office. “Shoddy” was the name given to the poorly made fabric, cheap to assemble and quick to disintegrate, that many dry goods retailers sold the federal government to make the Union army’s uniforms and blankets. A poem in *Harper’s Weekly* summed up the general resentment that the salesmen of shoddy generated in 1862. The poem ran:

Go where you chose, look where you will,
You’ll find these army leeches;
In church, in Congress on the stump,
A making *Union* speeches.
Round bar-room fires these wintry nights
They drink their whisky-toddy
While shiver, shiver in the camps
The men they clothed in shoddy.⁸⁴

Yet for all the disapproval, the sale of shoddy – or any wartime necessity – could be a lucrative business. As fortunes for some soared during the war, suspicion began to settle on the families who could, more than ever, buy the material comforts and luxuries in life. When that wealth seemed new, then those consumers were identified as ‘The Shoddy’s:’

⁸³ Wallace and Burrows, *Gotham*, 875; Gallman, “Entrepreneurial Experiences in the Civil War,” 212.

⁸⁴ “Leeches,” *Harpers Weekly*, Jan. 25, 1862.

a family of tasteless, heartless parasites who enjoyed the trappings of wealth despite the fact that that same wealth had derived from the suffering of others.⁸⁵

Identifying a family of ‘Shoddys’ was accomplished by assessing material wealth along side style and taste. It was not simply the consumption of silks, hats, flowers, feathers and jewelry that provoked condemnation but the excessive and ostentatious display of these purchases that incurred public disapproval. Stories printed in *Harper’s Weekly* satirized these shoddy consumers, laughing at their lack of gentility despite their ability to purchase diamond bracelets. So for example, “Jaynan Hubbs” the daughter of a washerwoman was made to look ludicrous in one such story because upon her marriage to a “Mr. Weevil,” - a tallow-chandler who supplied the Union army with “hides, hoofs and other remains of slaughtered cattle” - she went out and bought silk moiré dresses, diamond rings and lace handkerchiefs. The hideous juxtaposition of the dead cattle with the trappings of genteel wealth was made more comic by the fact that “Jaynan” wore the moiré at the wrong time of year, put too many diamonds on at once and spoke and acted in such a vulgar way that her purchases only served to highlight her lack of class.⁸⁶

The “Jaynan Hubbs” story laid bare a middle-class anxiety that predated the war itself. The democratization of material goods and prosperity had been heralded as part of the wonder of the American democratic experiment. In 1840 De Tocqueville himself had argued that “the love of comfort ha[d] become the dominant taste of the nation.”⁸⁷ But this widespread aspiration to wealth and comfort was not always, as De Tocqueville noted, built on solid foundations. He argued that people’s desires outstripped their means

⁸⁵ Wallace and Burrows, *Gotham*, 877-879.

⁸⁶ “The Romance of a Poor Young Woman,” *Harpers Weekly*, Feb. 27, 1864.

⁸⁷ Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America and Two Essays on America*, trans. Gerald E. Bevan with an introduction and notes, Isaac Kramnick (London: Penguin, 2003), 618.

and so they looked for shortcuts, such as cheap goods and mediocre craftsmanship.⁸⁸ This criticism lay at the heart of the “Shoddy” stories. The democratization of wealth was all very well when it was confined to people who displayed their wealth tastefully. But extended to those who embarrassed the nation by gaining their wealth through dubious means and depriving the needy in order to satisfy their own consumer cravings eroded the moral bedrock of society and blurred the social boundaries that many in the wealthy middle-class were anxious to maintain. Attacking the women like “Jaynan Hubbs” was an effort to maintain faith in the idea that while the democratization of consumer goods could reflect a vision of a genteel and morally superior American nation it still could not erode the strict social divisions that existed in American society.

The attack on the ‘Shoddy’s’ encompassed both male and female consumers, but it is worth noting that the public was more likely to denigrate men for the sums they spent on the women in their families rather than what they spent on themselves as individuals. Indeed, more often than not, public denunciations of “shoddy” consumption in magazines made women the chief target of their disapproval. [Fig. 6.5] Condemning women for their heartless spending came easily to a society that was already poised to examine and assess women’s purchases in the marketplace and see their taste and choice as a reflection of something larger than an individual decision. Women themselves were aware of this kind of judgment and responded accordingly. Writing to her sister Minnie in December 1863, having sent her a new dress, Victorine Haven commented, “Papa thought you were not much struck with your dress – but it was the best we could find at the price, and I did not feel justified in spending any more – I think it will make up well, and look ladylike,

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 538-39.

and in these *days of shoddy*, you don't want anything more."⁸⁹ Victorine Haven's comment reflected a society where spending was carefully judged and assessed. While Haven went on to remind her sister to keep herself looking neat and tidy, the idea that her dress might look a little shabby was something that pleased Victorine, who felt it struck the right note in a wartime community. What the "shoddy stories" highlight is the way in which the meanings and practices of consumption during wartime, particularly by women, were filled with tension. On the one hand, as writers like Olmsted and Beecher Stowe had identified, the widespread consumption of consumer goods allowed for the visible construction of a genteel middle-class but on the other hand, these purchases could all too easily come to signify the unstable boundaries of middle-class life and the ways in which the American capitalist democracy cultivated tasteless and immoral citizens.

The 'shoddy stories' thus reflected the public's uncertainty over the nation's morality. Individuals wondered whether those who made money from the war and then spent that money on themselves rather than the nation were immoral anomalies or actually the representative citizen in a capitalist democracy. Reporting on the lavish "Russian Ball" in 1863, that was given in New York in honor of a Russian regiment, *Harpers Weekly* allowed Mr. Shoddy a rare opportunity to voice his side of the story, apparently to make him sound ridiculous. But his questions struck a chord. "Are we all to put on sackcloth and ashes for the war?" asked Mr. Shoddy.

"Are Mrs. and Misses Shoddy not to have an opportunity of displaying their beauty – to say nothing of their splendid dresses and the magnificent diamonds which I bought them with the proceeds of paper-money – simply because we are engaged in a war? The notion is monstrous! I pay for the war: taxes on my

⁸⁹ Victorine Haven Putnam to Mary Putnam Jacobi, Dec. 1863 in *Life and Letters of Mary Putnam Jacobi* ed. Ruth Putnam, (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1925), 69-70. (My emphasis).

income, taxes on my clothing, taxes on my house, horses, carriages, silver, and every thing that I have got; I send my blood relations to the war to fight and die, I give money for bounties and money to the Sanitary Commission; I vote to support the Government. Having done all of this, I submit that my duty is fulfilled, and that I may, if I choose, get up balls for Mrs. and Misses Shoddy.”⁹⁰

The article went on to concede uneasily that Mr. Shoddy had a point. In the wartime capitalist democracy everyone who bought luxury goods contributed to the coffers of the nation. Thus, distasteful as it was, Mr. Shoddy’s position was hard to refute, even though it exposed a moral conundrum at the heart of the North’s political economy of war. The Union had created an economic structure in which there was no longer a logical reason to restrain a citizen’s consumption of luxury goods, be they foreign or domestic. By 1862, in stark contrast to the ethos of the Revolution, to spend your money on whatever you pleased, had become a facet of civic virtue.

Excessive spending on luxury goods was undeniably a troubling fact of the Union’s wartime economy. Those who engaged in that kind of consumption constituted the dark moral underbelly of the Union’s superiority and success. But this kind of consumption was not the only kind to emerge out of the war. In contrast to the greedy acquisition of the profiteers, many more citizens dedicated themselves to the task of patriotic consumption. This practice was created in part by wartime retailers and printers who worked hard to make the most out of the commercial opportunities the war offered. But beyond that, individual citizens turned to consumer goods to help them express their loyalty to the Union cause between 1861 and 1865. These men and women deliberately sought out goods that had been patriotically packaged using Union imagery and then

⁹⁰ “The Russian Ball,” *Harpers Weekly*, Nov. 21, 1863.

wove these goods into their daily support of the Union cause. Buying these items made little practical difference to the nation's finances. Instead the consumption of these goods operated as part of a politics of representation. It was these purchases that came to encapsulate the way in which Americans both during and after the war would imagine virtuous civic consumption, that is to say, the consumption that they would undertake in their efforts to be good citizens.

Wartime retailers found a number of ways to commodify patriotic sentiment, usually by emblazoning Union imagery on to already popular products ranging from items like stationery and playing cards to fans and women's dress collars. These retailers clearly believed that branding these goods with Union symbols would appeal to consumers and help boost their profits. In doing so, they gave individuals left on the homefront an opportunity to engage in a performance of citizenship. Through the purchase, use and exchange of these items, individuals could imagine themselves to be part of a patriotic community. As non-combatant citizens in the North demanded and then incorporated these goods into the many ways in which they attempted to aid the war effort and support the Union, the purchase of these goods became a means by which citizens in New York, Philadelphia and beyond could articulate an allegiance to the nation, both materially and symbolically.

The idea that the purchase of commercial goods could express patriotism was in many ways new to the Civil War but it was not a complete innovation. Two previous practices informed and helped to develop this trade in patriotic commodities. The first was a long tradition in America of creating political memorabilia that supported or commemorated particular political candidates or campaigns. Patriotic insignia had

appeared on jugs, silk scarves, glassware and other items from the 1790s onwards. But for the most part this partisan memorabilia was decorated with the profiles or portraits of individual candidates. The only significant exception to this was during William Henry Harrison's 1840 campaign, best known for the slogan "Tippecanoe and Tyler too." During that race, the symbol of the log cabin had come to represent (somewhat falsely) Harrison's rough frontier outlook, and as a result there had been an outburst of log cabins depicted on various items as part of an effort by artisans to cash in on popular support for the campaign. But for the most part, these objects connected people to political figures and policies, not the nation at large.⁹¹ Of course, much of the commodified patriotism during the war years blurred that line. Many of the images that graced lithographs, carte-de-visites, stationery and other objects were based on portraits of Lincoln. But more than ever, the Civil War saw the creation of a set of objects that connected individuals with the idea of the nation as a whole.

A second and equally important context was the fundraising fair, which provided American women in particular with a link between their consumption and a cause.⁹² Starting in the late 1820s, the fair became a popular way for middle-class women to raise money for various charitable causes, the most famous of these being the abolition society fairs in the 1850s. At each event, the women organizers would sell a range of homemade fancy work items to fair attendees, allowing the visitors to connect their purchase of fancy work and domestic furnishings directly to the support of a cause. Although the women were supposed to sell only home made items, thus remaining outside the

⁹¹ The best discussion of all these items is Roger A. Fischer, *Tippecanoe and Trinkets Too: The American Material Culture of American Presidential Campaigns, 1828-1984* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

⁹² Beverly Gordon, *Bazaars and Fair Ladies: The History of the American Fundraising Fair* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998), 9-43.

commercial realm, this separation was always shaky. The non-commercial fairs held by the Franklin and American Institutes to promote domestic manufacturing had proved as much in the 1830s and 40s. Individual entrants to the fair had used their stalls to publicize both their stock and trade and women vendors of fancy work and other items were no different.⁹³

The overlap between the commercial and the charitable realm was particularly noticeable during the war, with the former coming to the aid of the latter. Indeed, some businesses deliberately attempted to attract the custom of women who had promised to make mittens, socks or other items for the United States Sanitary Commission or Ladies Aid Societies. By gaining the endorsement of charitable wartime organizations, a variety of businessmen sought to attract female customers who needed yarns and other haberdashery items to supply the military with the knitted and hand sewn goods they had promised to make. Similarly, hosiery dealers supplied collectable mitten patterns to magazines that instructed women to collect the diagrams from their store, hoping that while there they would perhaps succumb and buy the socks or mittens instead. King and Baird, a Philadelphia printing firm, printed out an eye catching red and blue mitten pattern, not only advertising their own services as printers but also the services of the sewing machine company, Wilcox and Gibbs and the military furnishing store E.W. Carryl & Co. Thus, while ostensibly aiding with the distribution of patterns that would facilitate charitable labor, these diagrams also offered women the chance to buy the items they would need to do their patriotic duty.⁹⁴

⁹³ See Chapter 4.

⁹⁴ "Woman's Central Association of Relief. Printed patterns for knitting mittens and socks for the United States Army" undated. Pf MS Am 1084 (1589), Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States,

With the advent of the large New York and Philadelphia fairs in 1864, this blurring of commercial and charitable buying and selling reached its height. Competing for prestige, the wealthiest women actually purchased fantastically expensive items to resell at the Sanitary Commission Fairs. Harriet Woolsey Hodge wrote in a letter dated March 1864 “New York is really in a disgusting state of fashionable excitement; nothing is talked of, or dreamed of but the big Metropolitan Fair! Mrs. Parker has her thousand dollar tea sets to dispose of... and Mrs. Somebodyelse [sic] the beautiful jewelry sent from Rome.”⁹⁵ These were extreme examples and yet it is easy to forget that much had to be bought for women to make these charitable goods. Beyond the efforts of individual women who made goods to sell, retailers and merchants of all kinds donated goods that then went on sale at these great fundraising events. The Great Central Sanitary Fair in Philadelphia in 1864, for example, was modeled after a department store, with different counters for different goods. Visitors could browse the carpet stand, the stoves and hollow-ware counter, the house-furnishing and looking glasses counter and a host of others up to and including the Wax Fruit stand.⁹⁶ The fair was so successful that local businesses feared the loss of their usual customers. Visitors apparently saw these events as wonderful spectacles, patriotic events and great shopping opportunities. Thus the

The Houghton Library, Harvard University; “Mitten Pattern,” (Philadelphia: King and Baird, n.d) Print Room, LCP; “Henry C. Blair Slipper Pattern” (Philadelphia: James Dobelbower, n.d) Print Room, LCP.

⁹⁵ Harriet Woolsey Hodge to Georgeanna Muirson Bacon and Jane Stuart Woolsey, March 1864 in *Letters of a Family During the War for the Union 1861-1865* eds. Georgiana Woolsey Bacon and Eliza Woolsey Howland, (Privately published, 1899), 2: 568-570.

⁹⁶ “Ground Plan of the Great Central Sanitary Fair” from *Our Daily Fare*, no. 1 (June 8, 1864), LCP reprinted in Elizabeth Milroy, “Avenue of Dreams: Patriotism and the Spectator at Philadelphia’s Great Central Sanitary Fair” in *Making and Remaking Pennsylvania’s Civil War* ed. William Blair and William Pencak (University Park, PA.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 34.

fundraising fairs not only taught participants to produce for a cause but to shop for it as well.⁹⁷

Set against the context of campaign memorabilia and fundraising fairs, middle-class citizens in New York and Philadelphia had no trouble identifying the patriotic goods produced by printers and retailers as items they could buy to express their allegiance. But one factor set this merchandise aside from the goods that were sold at the fair or on behalf of political candidates. These items were clearly sold by experienced businessmen to make a profit. Indeed, in most cases the entrepreneurs who created and sold these patriotic goods were not new to their trade and like other wartime businessmen, they parlayed the opportunities created by the conflict into new business, with mixed success.⁹⁸ James Gibbons, a Philadelphia printer who offered his customers the chance to place Union imagery on everything from fancy cards to checks and bills of lading, was already the owner of a well established business in 1860. His personal estate was worth \$15,000 and he owned real estate valued at \$5,000. Five years after the end of the conflict, his fortunes had taken a severe dip. He had lost over half his personal estate and \$2,000 worth of his real estate.⁹⁹ Others were more fortunate. Charles Magnus who listed himself as a lithographer in the New York city directory in 1859 was offering customers U.S. military stationary packages by 1861. Being from New York, a city that

⁹⁷ See Milroy, "Avenue of Dreams" and J. Matthew Gallman, "Voluntarism in Wartime: Philadelphia's Great Central Fair," in *Toward a Social History of the American Civil War: Exploratory Essays* ed. Maris A. Vinovkis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 102-109.

⁹⁸ For trades beyond printing see J. Matthew Gallman, "Entrepreneurial Experiences in the Civil War: Evidence from Philadelphia," in *American Economic Development in Historical Perspective* ed. Thomas Weiss and Donald Schaefer, (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1994), 205-222, see also Spann, *Gotham at War*, 94.

⁹⁹ Federal Census 1860 (Ward 11, Philadelphia PA) Roll M653_1161, 968, Image 271. Federal Census 1870 (Ward 10, District 32 Philadelphia PA) Roll M593_1395, 583, Image 866. www.ancestry.com [accessed March 8, 2009]. See also Arnold T. Schwab, *James Gibbons Huneker: Critic of the Seven Arts* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963), 1.

had an active and vocal anti-Republican contingent, Magnus hedged his bets and offered the “Union emblem and the State arms” on his printed envelopes, rather than only anti-Southern, pro-Union sentiments offered to patrons by his colleagues. He may not have been as wealthy as Gibbons at the start of the conflict, owning only \$1000 in personal property but he ended the war with \$5000 in personal property.¹⁰⁰

Outside of publishing and printing, other tradesmen built on their existing business to make a profit. William F. Warburton, a Philadelphia hatter who had \$10,000 in real estate and \$5,000 in personal property in 1860, used the conflict as an opportunity to bring out a new piece of headgear for men in 1861 called the ‘Unionist.’ “The ‘Unionist’ [had] everything in its form and trimmings to recommend it to Civilians of taste and [had] withal an individuality about it at once significant of the capital name it [bore] and [was] every way worthy of being THE NATIONAL HAT of the times.”¹⁰¹ Warburton was so convinced of his hat’s brilliance that he went to the trouble of obtaining the hat size of the President and sent a sample to Lincoln in 1864 just before the election. Although sincere in his patriotism and his praise of “the beauty and perfection of the Flag of America,” Warburton could not resist one small “hatter’s joke.” “Should the hat not fit you properly,” he wrote, “I beg that you will permit me to make another with such variations as may be necessary; for I shall esteem it no small honor to have made a hat for the present, and it is to be hoped, future head of our great nation.”¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ New York Business Directory 1859; Federal Census 1860 (Hoboken, Ward, Hudson NJ) Roll M653_692, 692, Image 221 and Federal Census 1870 (Ward 10, District 11, New York, NY) Roll M593_985, 464, Image 317. www.ancestry.com [accessed March 8, 2009].

¹⁰¹ William F. Warburton “The Unionist” (Philadelphia? n.d) Print Room, LCP. On Warburton see Federal Census 1860 (Ward 7 Philadelphia, PA) Roll M653_1157, 101 Image 102. Warburton does not appear in the Census for 1870 and may have died, despite only being 40 years old in 1860.

¹⁰² William F. Warburton Sr. to Abraham Lincoln, September 30, 1864, Series I, General Correspondence, *Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress* Manuscript Division (Washington D.C.: American Memory Project, [2002-02] www.ancestry.com [accessed March 8, 2009]. Although we don’t know if

Men like Warburton, Magnus and Gibbons were just a few of the individuals who attempted to harness the outburst of patriotic sentiment to serve their own ends in 1861.¹⁰³ These men were savvy and successful, so it is hardly surprising that they responded to their customers' demands and provided American shoppers with a way of expressing their passion for their nation.

One of the most successful commodities to go on sale in 1861 was patriotic stationery. Printers covered notepaper and envelopes with Union imagery that ranged from flags to eagles to pictures of federal soldiers or Union generals. In all there were over 4000 designs created within the first six months of the Civil War.¹⁰⁴ They were such a sensation that printers soon began to create "Union" stationary packages. These products offered consumers a chance to buy not only stationary but also pens, pen holders, jewelry, patriotic songs and artistic prints of Union generals. Costing only 25 cents, these packages promised "millions" of Americans the opportunity to root for a Union victory and promote the Union cause amongst one another. They were even advertised under the banner of "sustaining" the "government and flag." While some packages were aimed at women writing to men in the field, others were designed with the soldier in mind, with one printer offering to send packages directly to the front if necessary. [Fig. 6.6]

Like many of the other patriotic goods to hit the marketplace, the Union stationary was a product that lithographers and printers managed to produce quickly and

Lincoln wore the hat, we do know he sent it back for adjustments, see Warburton to Lincoln, October 17, 1864.

¹⁰³ Another line of trade that profited in a different way from the war but that equally made the most of the opportunity was the dry goods trade in mourning goods. See Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 147-156.

¹⁰⁴ Stephen Berry, "When Mail was Armor: Envelopes of the Great Rebellion," *Southern Culture* 4 (Fall 1998).

disseminate effectively. While they could be bought directly from the stationary and printing stores in city centers, the printers and publishers also advertised for agents, who would buy a large number of packages and then sell them around the country. Caroline Clarke, a young woman from Canandaigua in upstate New York, became one such customer in May 1861. In the month since General Anderson had surrendered at Fort Sumter, Clarke's life had suddenly become full of new sights, sounds and activities. "We hear the martial music and see the flags flying" she wrote, "and see the recruiting tents on the square and meet men in uniform at every turn." But Clarke was realistic enough to restrain her enthusiasm. "It seems very patriotic and grand when [the soldiers] are singing 'It is sweet, Oh 'tis sweet for one's country to die'" she observed, "...but it will not seem so grand if we hear they are dead on the battlefield." But if Clarke had her reservations about the rewards of patriotism, she did not dwell on them overmuch. Instead, she went on to recount her own efforts in the past week to support the Union, carefully totting up the sum of her activities.¹⁰⁵

First on her list was a trip down to the train station. "A lot of us girls went down to the train and took flowers to the soldiers as they were passing through" she wrote. The soldiers were flattered by such attention and Clarke noted with excitement that the soldiers had "cut buttons from their coats [which they] gave to us as souvenirs." These mementos reminded Clarke of the other items she and her friends had amassed in the recent weeks to display their patriotism. "We have flags on our paper and envelopes, and have all our stationery bordered with red, white and blue," she wrote. "We wear little flag pins for badges and tie our hair with red, white and blue ribbon and have pins and

¹⁰⁵ Caroline Cowles Richards Clarke, *Village Life in America 1852-1872 Including the Period of the American Civil War as Told in the Diary of a School-Girl* (New York, NY: Henry Holt & Co., 1913), 136-137.

earrings made of the buttons the soldiers gave us.”¹⁰⁶ Clarke made little distinction between the soldiers’ buttons and the stationary, but nonetheless there was an important difference between these items, whether Clarke noted it or not. The stationary, ribbons and flag pins were all objects that Caroline Clarke had bought in a shop.

In the days and weeks that followed, Clarke joined sewing societies and went to rallies and speeches, all of which were ways she tied herself to the Union cause. However, her first performance of civic belonging during those early weeks of war had been to go shopping. Her decision to buy the patriotic stationery, jewelry and hair ribbons had helped her to define her relationship to her nation in a time of war. Watching the young men go off to fight, Clarke had been reminded of her own efforts to support the nation, describing her purchases as one of a number of activities that she felt proved her allegiance to the cause. She was well aware that her acts of allegiance were not as dangerous as those of the soldiers whom she watched departing. She realized that war meant the loss of her friends and her friends’ family. While not unduly serious or studious, her diary reveals a young woman who thought about her patriotism. Thus, it is not surprising to discover that for Clarke, the purchase of patriotic stationery had not been the whim of a girl caught up in the whirl of wartime mobilization. Eleven months later, in the wake of Washington’s Birthday celebrations, she noted that she had “some new patriotic stationery.” Describing her new purchase she proudly noted, “[t]here is a picture of the flag on the envelope and underneath, [the motto] ‘If any one attempts to haul down the American flag shoot him on the spot. -- John A. Dix.’”¹⁰⁷ For Clarke, like other women at the time, a powerful way for her to feel herself to be part of the war effort

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 139.

was to purchase these items and the way she proved her patriotism to herself and others was to buy it.

Similar products abounded. Playing cards bedecked with Union imagery went on sale, so that social occasions could now also be moments where consumers of these items could display allegiance to the cause.¹⁰⁸ Mechanical reproductions of famous generals circulated through society. Sarah Butler Wister, visiting Elizabeth Clarke in Philadelphia in June 1861, noted that her friend had a “likeness” of the recently killed Colonel Elmer Ellsworth in her photograph album. This album was brought out and shown around and Wister noted that Ellsworth was “a singularly handsome person, [though] fleshy of course.” This exchange is more interesting than a simple case of display because Clarke had brought out the album only after a second guest had made disparaging comments about the Colonel’s lack of discipline. For Clarke and perhaps Wister too, bringing out the album had been a way to silence the criticism.¹⁰⁹ These images of important military and political persona were not confined to small photographic cards. Commercial artists produced a plethora of lithographed prints depicting Union generals and politicians.¹¹⁰ They could be bought separately or cut out of books to be placed on parlor walls as an indication of one’s support for the cause. Similar images appeared on cartes-de-visites – so that individual calling cards became a means of telegraphing patriotic sentiment within a social network. Women were even offered the opportunity to buy paper collars printed with the Stars and Stripes. These “Union” Collars would attach onto women’s dresses,

¹⁰⁸ See for example Union Playing Cards, Playing Card Collection, Box 2, (PR 115 -1-20) Print Room, N-YHS.

¹⁰⁹ Fanny Kemble Wister, “Sarah Butler Wister’s Civil War Diary,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 102 (July 1978): 303.

¹¹⁰ A rich selection exists in the Military Order of the Loyal Legion Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

signaling their support for the cause to any casual passerby. [Fig. 6.7] All of these products offered women in particular a chance to buy and publically display their patriotic credentials. These could occasionally become too much for even the most committed Unionist. Jane Stuart Woolsey, writing from New York in May 1861 mocked the more ostentatious displays of patriotic consumption. Laughingly she recounted her encounter with “the woman who walks in Broadway in that fearful object of contemplation, a ‘Union bonnet’ composed of alternate layers of red, white and blue, with some streaming ribbons “of the first [order].”¹¹¹

However, bonnets were not the favorite purchase. In the days after the surrender at Fort Sumter, urban New Yorkers and Philadelphians all invested in flags or patriotic emblems. Abby Howland Woolsey – Jane’s sister – described in her letters how strange it was to see New York all decked out with patriotic bunting. “The city is like a foreign one now,” she wrote. For Woolsey there was something distinctly un-American about the outburst of patriotism. But as her description indicates, other New Yorkers did not feel the same. “The flag floats from every public building and nearly every shop displays some patriotic emblem,” she commented. Clearly the Woolsey sisters had a wicked streak. Abby continued, “Jane amused herself in shopping yesterday, by saying to everyone: “You have no flag out yet! Are you getting one ready? Etc. Shopkeepers said in every instance: “No – well – we mean to have one: we are having one prepared.”¹¹²

If Jane Woolsey found this funny, there were other communities that saw a more immediate danger in not buying and displaying patriotic goods. Indeed, the need to

¹¹¹ Jane Stuart Woolsey, May 10, 1861, in *Letters of a Family During the War for the Union 1861-1865* eds. Georgiana Woolsey Bacon and Eliza Woolsey Howland, (Privately published, 1899), 1: 66-71.

¹¹² Abby Howland Woolsey to Eliza Newton Woolsey, April 19, 1861 in *Letters of Family During the Civil War*, ed. Woolsey and Woolsey, 1:39-44.

express loyalty to the Union cause in April 1861 was no laughing matter. Describing the scene in Philadelphia, Sarah Butler Wister described a mob pouring into town after the news that Fort Sumter had surrendered. “Thousands...marched through the streets their numbers swelling as they went, & visited the houses, stores & offices of some of the leading Loco Focos which of course have been especially odious in the last few days. George Martin left town or lay perdu. Bob Tyler literally [sic] fled before them; others hung out flags & made patriotic & pacifying speeches.”¹¹³ Wister herself was particularly sensitive to the need to display a flag or involve herself in patriotic activities. Her father was a known Southerner (Wister herself had married a Philadelphian and was staunchly pro-Union) and had loudly proclaimed his support for the Confederacy. He in fact, refused to return to Philadelphia after war broke out and in 1862 was imprisoned by the Union for his Confederate sympathies. Indeed, proving allegiance through the display of bought or made flags became an important demonstration of civic loyalty in April 1861. A novel entitled *The Days of Shoddy*, describing the days after Fort Sumter aptly captured how retailers attempted as best they could to respond to the shopper’s desires for patriotic decoration. “The costliest residences on the avenues vied with the places of trade and the public buildings in throwing out the national banner. The stocks of manufactured flags in the stores soon began to be exhausted and the prices doubled and trebled without any abatement in the demand. Soon the stock of silks, buntings and other ordinary flag materials began to run low: then flannels and muslins of the proper colors came into

¹¹³ Fanny Wister, “Sarah Butler Wister’s Civil War Diary,” 274-275.

requisition...the man who could not manage to procure a flag and did not do it stood in danger of at least an insult.”¹¹⁴

The making and wearing of flags became the most immediate and vivid way in which Union supporters could express their support of the nation in April 1861. But over the course of the first two years of the war, retailers provided shoppers with a means of knitting together the practices of domestic gentility with support for the Union. Nearly all of the items that went on sale – the ribbons and rosettes, the jewelry and collars, the stationary packages, lithographs and sheet music, the carte-de-visites and fans – were items that helped create the rituals of respectable middle-class dress and genteel middle-class parlor culture. In fact, with some exceptions, such as William Warburton’s “Union Hat,” many of the goods on sale were the accoutrement of middle-class female domesticity. In part this was a pragmatic move. With so many men away from home, fighting, wounded or dead, women represented the greater majority of people who would have access to shops and time to go shopping. This kind of civic consumption, by necessity, was left in the hands of women. Moreover, the retailers efforts to appeal to middle-class consumers was in part a result of the fact that the retailers themselves had imagined the new American shopper as a genteel and respectable figure, whose desires would be shaped by their middle-class lifestyle or aspirations. Thus, it is not surprising that the men who made and sold these goods fashioned the product to fit the shopper they imagined.

In contrast to the dilemma posed by the unrestrained luxury consumption of the ‘Shoddys,’ the sale and purchase of commodified patriotism proved to be comfortably

¹¹⁴ Henry Morford, *The Days of Shoddy: A Novel of the Great Rebellion in 1861* (Philadelphia: T.B Peterson and Brothers, 1863), 106. www.books.google.com [accessed Feb. 26, 2009].

simple. As a powerful but entirely symbolic act of consumption, the purchase of patriotic stationery, lithographs and dress collars, provided a way for citizens to be completely virtuous in their shopping for non-essential goods. The consumers who bought these goods communicated a sincere set of loyalties and were earnest in their efforts to proclaim their good citizenship. And while their shopping may have operated in a realm of representation and display, at least the transactions obscured the ways in which the Union was now a nation-state where excessive consumption of luxury goods and self-indulgence could be construed as a civic virtue. Indeed, the act of buying commodified patriotism soothed the fears of Americans who confronted the fact that since consumption now fuelled the growth of the nation, individuals who gave in to selfish consumer desires were good citizens in economic terms. Anxious to temper this realization, one that Bernard Mandeville had come to over a century earlier, Americans used patriotic consumption as a way to mitigate the truth: that their virtuous republic was now set upon a course which would, in time, allow the consumption and not the production of its citizens to fund and ultimately sustain the life and health of the nation.

"The Union must and shall be Preserved"



NEW SPRING & SUMMER GOODS
Bought at **PANIC PRICES!!**

McCAN & ARTER,

Have just received a large and beautiful stock of SPRING AND SUMMER GOODS, which have been bought at PANIC PRICES, in Philadelphia and selected with great care to suit the wants of their customers, among which may be found

DRY GOODS!

OF EVERY DESCRIPTION;
Fancy Dress Goods, Silks, &c.

A LARGE STOCK OF
GROCERIES, HARDWARE, QUEENSWARE

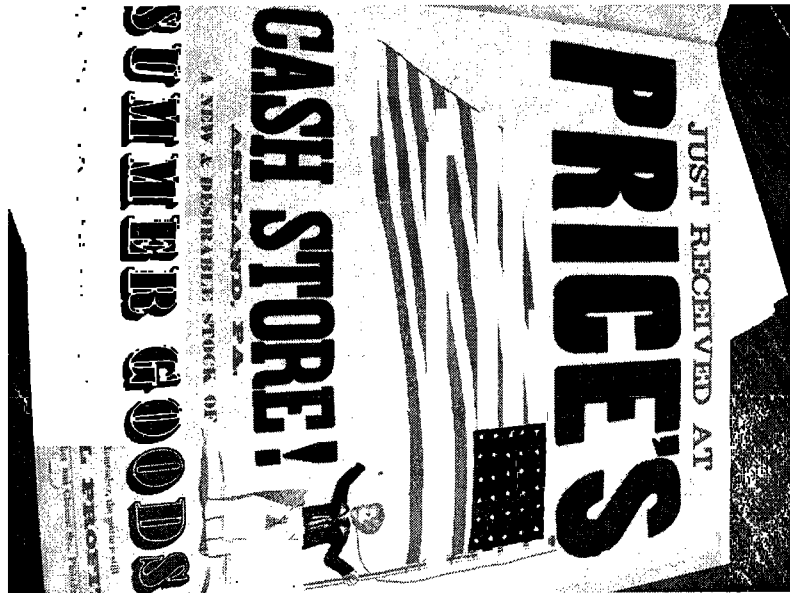
Boots and Shoes, Hats and Caps, &c.

Together with everything usually kept in a Country Store, all of which will be sold low for Cash or Produce. Call before purchase elsewhere, as they are determined to give Bargains.

McCAN & ARTER

DUROSS, PRINTER, BLACK HORSE ALLEY, PHILADELPHIA

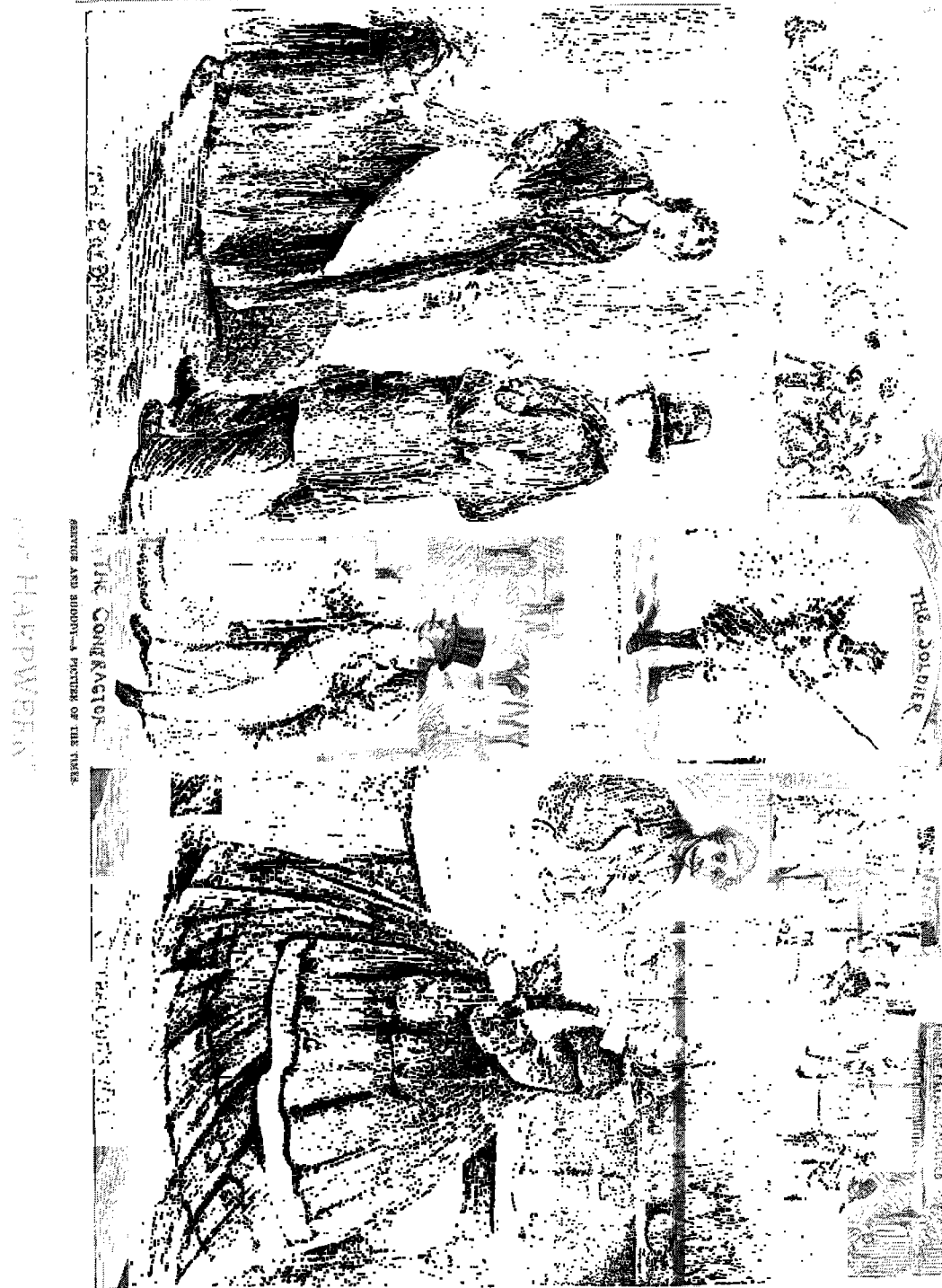
(Fig. 6.2) McCan & Arter, *The Union Must and Shall be Preserved*, (Philadelphia: Duross Brothers, 1861). Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.



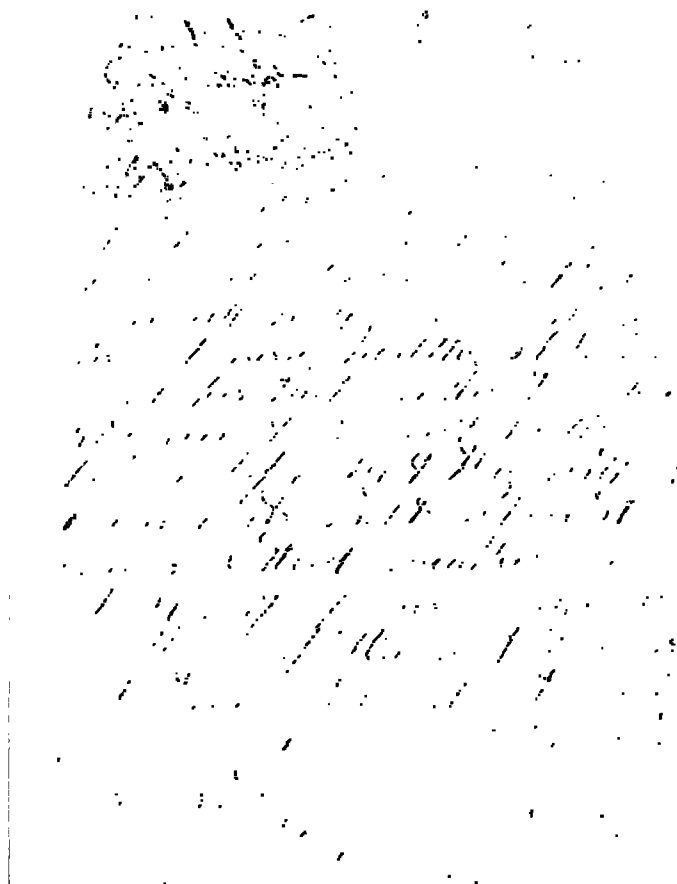
(Fig. 6.3) Price's Cash Store, (Philadelphia: Duross Brothers, 186?). Courtesy of LCP and Elfelt's Union Dry Goods Store, (Philadelphia: Duross Brothers, 186?). Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.



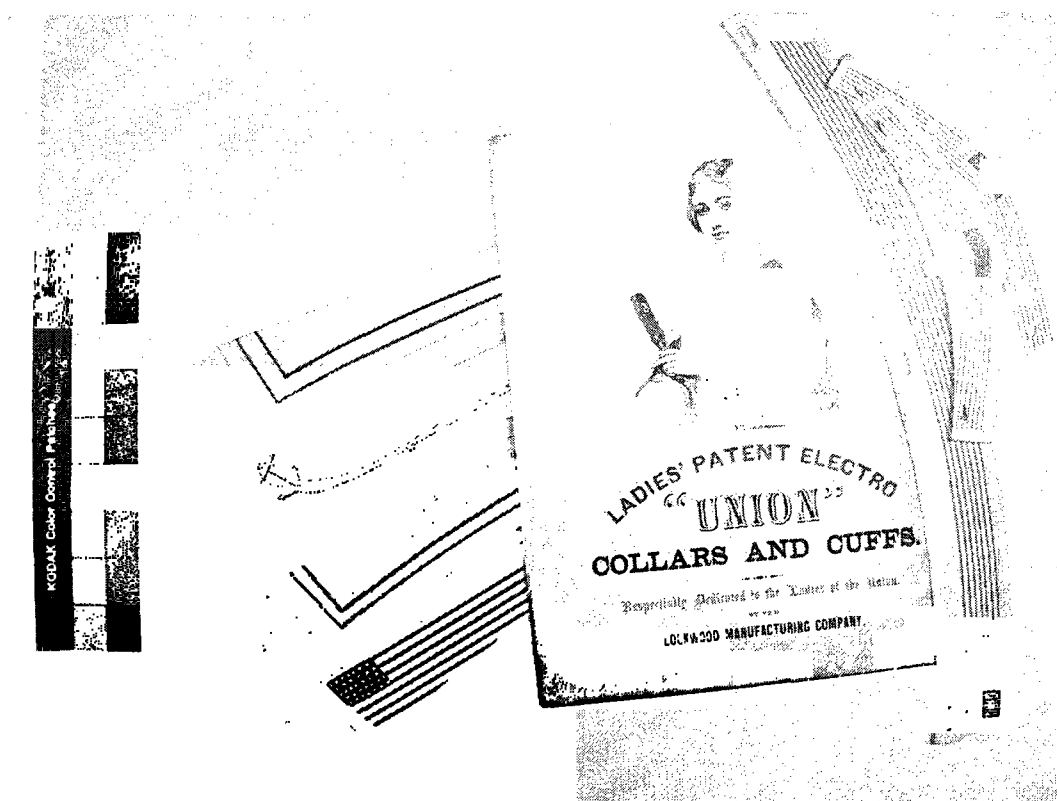
(Fig. 6.4) King and Baird Specimen Sheet, (Philadelphia: King and Baird, 186?).
 Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.



(Fig. 6.5) "Service and Shoddy – A Picture of the Times." *Harpers Weekly* October 24, 1863.



(Fig. 6.6) Example of letter written on pre-printed stationery, from the Warshaw Collection, Archive Center, National Museum of American History, Washington D.C. Courtesy of the National Museum of American History.



(Fig. 6.7) Union Cuffs and Collars, Prints and Graphics Department, Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

Conclusion

The Consumer's Centennial

The opening of the Centennial Exhibition in May 1876 was a welcome highlight to those Americans who were still struggling in the aftermath of the Depression of 1873. The first day alone saw over 185,000 visitors enter the Exhibition grounds in Philadelphia's Fairmount Park. By the time the Exhibition closed in November, nearly one fifth of the U.S. population had visited the City of Brotherly Love to see the once in a life time spectacle. Visitors could marvel at the five main Exhibition Halls, which included a vast Machinery Hall and a teeming Agricultural Hall, as well as wander through the restaurants, cafes, cigar pavilions and popcorn stands, spread out along the wooded hills overlooking the Schuylkill River.¹ But they could also take the opportunity to see the plethora of practical and luxurious commodities which manufacturers and dealers had brought to the Exhibition. With so many potential customers strolling through the grounds, the exhibitors worked hard to capture the attention of the visitors. They

¹ Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair. Visions of Empire at International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 10.

advertised their goods with trade cards, circulars and catalogues, using the insignia of the United States – flags, eagles and even “Miss Columbia” and “Brother Jonathan” – to package their goods and yoke the sale of their merchandize to the fair’s expansive vision of progress and civilization.²

Through this lens, the Exhibition could be seen as a triumphant conclusion; an end to the pressing problems of political economy which Americans had faced in the antebellum era. The Exhibition’s emphasis on America’s ability to produce marvelous goods for the benefit of its citizens fulfilled a facet of the Jeffersonian dream. Those who had yearned for self-sufficiency and cherished production saw their hopes realized in the vast Machinery Hall and the awards handed out for innovative production. More broadly, the Exhibition confirmed that Americans could now supply themselves with the necessities and luxuries of life. As such, the pageantry of 1876 saw an age old problem finally slip away. The need to develop American manufacturing had finally been satisfied and the Centennial Exhibition marked the end of the nineteenth century anxiety that Americans could be capable producers. In a similar way, the exhibitor’s decision to frame the sale of merchandize as part of the project of patriotic nation-building, confirmed the links that Americans had forged between unrestrained shopping and good citizenship during the Civil War. There was no doubt that the display and sale of new goods was a crucial part of the celebration of the American nation.

But the vision from the Exhibition was not entirely rosy. Over the course of the fair, Philadelphia newspapers commented on the malaise that had plagued the American economy since the Depression in 1873. Editors observed that the “home markets were

² The Brother Jonathan and Miss Columbia example is “Miss Columbia in the Kitchen and Why” (1876) Folder 1, Box 87, Bella Landauer Collection, New-York Historical Society.

exhausted” and this threw up new questions about the role and responsibilities of the American consumer. Journalists began to look abroad, hoping that consumers in Asia would take on the role that Americans themselves had once played for England. They hoped Asian consumers would begin to buy the products that U.S. manufacturers made, thus stimulating and sustaining America’s ailing economy.³ Following the same colonial pattern that had once been imposed on them, Americans turned to consumers in countries they saw as inferior to supply the demand for U.S. goods that would revive their failing economy. In looking to Asia, Americans who claimed the liberty to consume freely, tacitly acknowledged that such a right would rely on the purchasing habits of foreign consumers.

This burgeoning imperial relationship marked a new moment in the history of American civic consumption. The ways in which race and empire defined American understandings of consumption and citizenship lie beyond the scope of this project, but it is important to note that these issues took root in a post-republican era of political economy. In the early republic, newspaper editors and politicians would have looked to producers to solve their economic problems. Indeed, it is impossible to imagine them seeking solutions to a Depression by looking for new consumers. It was because of the ways in which citizens of the early republic eventually defined and created a powerful consumer, that this new chapter of American consumer culture could open and unfold. Inherent in America’s twentieth century vision of economic strength and foreign markets

³ Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair*, 29.

lies the consumer that Americans created in the nineteenth century.

This project argues that between the end of the Revolution and the end of the Civil War, politicians, merchants, manufacturers, retailers, advertisers and consumers made personal consumption a central part of their civic belonging. The cumulative result of their self-interested actions gave the purchase of consumer goods such as fine clothing and household furnishings a civic gloss by 1865. They turned material comfort and prosperity into the proof of the Union's superior political economy and the goods themselves into tools of good moral citizenship. Moreover, by weaving a sense of civic entitlement into the marketplace, middle-class urban Americans made the equal opportunity to buy new goods a part of what individuals should expect from their citizenship.

Moreover, the collective efforts of middle-class urban citizens helped to dismantle the republican political economy of the early nineteenth century. They liberated consumers from the obligation of serving one of the nation's three producing interests and over six decades created a new and powerful understanding of what it meant to be a consumer in the United States. In this construction, consumers were no longer asked to channel their consumption toward any end other than their own personal satisfaction. In fact by the Civil War, the only obligation laid upon consumers was the requirement to keep consuming, an act that helped to fund the government through a system of tariffs and excise taxation. If individuals in the 1760s had used the production of homespun or the refusal to buy silk or tea as a way of expressing their loyalty to America, a century later, shoppers bought stationery, home furnishings, playing cards and paper collars, all stamped with the flag, to declare a similar kind of allegiance. Through tracing the ways in

which this shift took place, this project makes the case that urban middle-class Americans collectively made consumption a central part of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in the United States, a vision of citizenship that has persisted into the twenty-first century.

All too often, the history of America's consumer culture begins with the appearance of the department store and the mail order catalogue in the 1880s and 1890s. This starting point is in some ways well-justified. In the twentieth century, American consumer culture took on its modern dimensions. The widespread availability of mass produced goods, the practice of habitual shopping and the increase in people's purchasing power all helped to formulate the parameters of twentieth century consumer culture. Above all though, the idea that consuming goods not only provided material comfort but, in fact, could allow the consumer to inhabit a fantasy that moved them beyond their daily existence, created a distinctive mode of consumerism. It is this notion of wish fulfillment through the act of browsing and buying that dominates our modern understandings of consumption.⁴

Yet as this project makes clear, to begin at this point is to miss the ways in which Americans first created a political and economic understanding of the consumer that would sustain this new expression of consumer culture. In focusing on the interconnections between American political economy and culture from the Revolution to the Civil War, this project has argued that the consumer – far from being a powerful figure or even a self-evident category at the nation's inception – was an individual that

⁴ Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985). For an excellent discussion on the question of how to periodize consumer society see Jean-Christophe Agnew, "Coming Up For Air: Consumer Culture in Historical Perspective," in *Consumer Society in American History* ed. Lawrence B. Glickman, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 373-398.

northeastern middle-class Americans slowly constructed as the nation emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century. Grudgingly acknowledging the political force of consumer desire in the 1800s and 1810s, politicians only slowly found ways to incorporate consumption into their vision of America's political economy. With the same reluctance, merchants and manufacturers came to see consumers as individuals who had a mind of their own, and whose decisions and desires could not be ignored when considering the shape of the nation's economy. Retailers, advertisers and free trade politicians were among the first to create a vision of the consumer who wielded genuine power, both culturally and economically, and literary voices added a civic dimension to that power in the North, making consumption a symbol for Union prosperity and moral superiority. Finally the imperatives of war unleashed the consumer from the restraints that had been put in place by Jefferson and the political economists of his generation. In destroying the bonds that an earlier vision of good citizenship had placed on the consumer, Republicans during the war released an energy that would fuel the creation of America's modern consumer culture.

In May 2009, as the nation's economy crashes down around the ears of its citizens, the energies unleashed by modern capitalism and the incessant impulse to spend remain contentious, as they have always been.⁵ Discussions over the issue of whether American citizens should retain their confidence in the nation and spend the United States out of a depression compete with debates over the inherent lack of responsibility that American consumers have shown in the past two decades, as the buyers of homes, cars, and other personal items. The consumer is both victim and scapegoat in a national

⁵ Michael Schudson, "Delectable Materialism: Second Thoughts on Consumer Culture," in *Consumer Society in American History* ed. Glickman, 341-358.

debate that is once again about the civic rights and responsibilities inherent in American consumption. The scale of this global economic crisis has certainly provoked expressions of helplessness from a large majority of the population. Yet if this project can contribute anything to this moment, it is the contention that at the very least, American citizens have the ability to re-make their rights and responsibilities as economic citizens, and perhaps in this way actively shape the capitalist democracy in which they live.

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